MAY MIDDLETON

— OR —

THE HISTORY OF A FORTUNE

By G. W. M. REYNOLDS.

15 MAR 1918

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MAY MIDDLETON

OR

THE HISTORY OF A FORTUNE

15 MAR '98

BY

GEORGE W. M. REYNOLDS,
AUTHOR OF THE MYSTERIES OF LONDON, MYSTERIES OF THE COURT OF LONDON, AGNES, MARY PRICE, BRONZE STATUE, SEAMSTRESS, ETC., ETC.

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Volume II.

West Indies. Oh, the agony of that separation!—Miss Middleton, I cannot describe it!"

Again did Mrs. St. George stop short, as if overpowered by her feelings; and May felt the tears trickling down her own cheeks. Oncemore she besought her visitress not to re-open the wounds in her heart: but Mrs. St. George said, in that harmonious grief-clouded voice of hers, "As I had the courage to commence my narrative, suffer me to finish it."

May could not offer any additional remonstrance; and Mrs. St. George proceeded in the following manner:—

"When my dear Frederick quitted his native shore, his mother came to reside with my father and myself. Scarcely a month had elapsed when my poor father was seized with a severe illness; and for three weeks was I day and night by his bedside. But, alas! my ministering cares were of no avail in the struggle against the rapid approach of the Destroyer; and one morning—a bright and beautiful morning, when the sun was shining so gloriously that it appeared as if it never could have been intended to shed its beams into the chamber of death—unless indeed as a promise and a foretaste of that brighter sphere to which the departing spirit was about to wing its flight,—on that morning so radiant for the world and so sad for me—so beautiful for nature and so full of gloom for my heart—did my poor father expire in my arms!"

It would be impossible to describe the tone of touching pathos in which the catastrophe was thus depicted: the language appeared to flow from the deep fountains of the heart of her who was narrating the tale. The influence of that pathos stole irresistibly into the kind sympathizing bosom of May Middleton; and the tears ran plenteously down her cheeks. Mrs. St. George, sobbed audibly; and for some minutes her sad history was suspended.

"It was indeed a memorable and a dreadful morning for me," she continued, at length resuming her tale: "for as my mother-in-law and myself knelt by the side of the couch on which any sire's cold corpse lay stretched, we were summoned thence to receive tidings which, if anything were wanting to complete our utter misery, were but too well calculated thus to crown it. Intelligence had been received late on the previous night by the owners of my poor husband's ship, that it

had been wrecked, and all had perished—yes, *all*, Miss Middleton—and my Frederick was engulfed in the deep waters!"

"Oh, Mrs. St. George, what a complication of afflicitions!" murmured our heroine, with so profound a sorrow that she felt as if she were identifying her own feelings with those which her visitress must have experienced at the time of which she was speaking.

"I will not dwell upon that dreadful portion of my history," continued Mrs. St, George: "those I loved dearest upon earth were gone—and within the same hour I found myself an orphan and a widow. But even this was not the extent of my woe—and heaven alone can tell how I ever survived it all! My poor mother-in-law was crushed and overcome by the weight of these frightful calamities; and in a few weeks after my sire was consigned to the grave, she followed him thither. I was then alone in the world—alone, alone! Oh, the desolation of the world itself!—Oh, the agony of its realization! But I was not merely alone—I was penniless. The friends who had banqueted at my father's table in the time of his prosperity, remained aloof: I had none to succour me. I endeavoured to support myself by my needle: but my eyes were too often dimmed by tears to enable me to perform enough work to gain a subsistence. Ah Miss Middleton! I have seen—I have felt—I have known want and penury in their direst forms—in their keenest intensity: but never did I lose my faith in heaven, though the world appeared to desert me. At length I became companion to an old lady; and for the bread which I ate I was compelled to endure all the whims and caprices of the most unamiable of tempers. Yet this lady conceived a friendship for me—though she displayed it not, and I was very far from suspecting that she entertained a spark of kind feeling towards me: I was with her for three years. She died and to my astonishment I found that she had left me the heiress of one-half of her little property, the other half being bequeathed to a religious community. I need say no more: you are now acquainted with my sad, sad history; and though it has poignantly revived my affection in one sense, yet the narration of it has soothed and consoled me in another, inasmuch as it has evoked the sympathy of one so kind, so good as you."

May Middleton had indeed bestowed all her compassion and all her heartfelt sympathy upon her new acquaintance; and when Mrs. St. George took her leave, it was with the understanding that she was to become the tenant of Woodbine Cottage. Our heroine knew full well that her father would approve of the course which she had adopted: and he did so. Indeed, when the worthy farmer heard from his daughter's lips the touching tale of Mrs. St. George's sorrows, he said, "My dear May, we must not only regard her as a tenant and a neighbour—but as a friend whom it is our Christian duty to solace and console."

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CHAPTER XXIV.

MAY AND HER FRIEND.

Mrs. St. George took immediate possession of Woodbine Cottage; and repairing to Leicester, she employed an upholsterer to furnish it in a modest but neat and tasteful style. Her order was speedily executed, inasmuch as it was backed by a sum of ready money on account; and when the upholsterer's work was accomplished, the remainder of his bill was at once liquidated. A respectable young woman—the daughter of a labouring man in the neighbourhood—was engaged as Mrs. St. George's servant, for she only intended to keep one: but an arrangement was made with the girl's father to come two or three times a week and take care of the garden. In all her dealings Mrs. St. George was most punctual and straightforward; and these circumstances speedily got bruited abroad in a rural neighbourhood where every one was certain to inquire into the character and means of any stranger settling down in their midst. But it soon transpired that Mrs. St. George was far from being altogether a stranger in these parts—inasmuch as for several months she had been residing as a lodger with an elderly widow lady in a neighbouring village; and during that period her conduct was most circumspect, her habits most retired, and her pursuits most domesticated. Thus Mrs. St. George came with a good reputation to Woodbine Cottage; and her behaviour there tended to support the favourable opinion which she had previously created.

Without experiencing the slightest scintillation of undue curiosity—without putting the least inquiry upon the subject—Farmer Middleton and his daughter could not, however, help from time to time hearing what was said of Mrs. St. George: and everything they did thus hear tended to their self-gratulation that they had so respectable a tenant for Woodbine Cottage, as well as so interesting a neighbour. It was not that the amount of rent paid for the little place was of the slightest consequence to one of May Middleton's considerable wealth: but Woodbine Cottage, with its picturesque garden, was considered to be an ornament upon the domain: and thus it was desirable that it should be in the hands of one who would maintain it creditably.

Farmer Middleton had bade his daughter regard Mrs. St. George not merely as a tenant and a neighbour, but likewise as a fellow-creature who had known much sorrow, and to whose bruised spirit all suitable and delicate consolation should be administered. The slightest hint on the subject was sufficient for the generous-hearted May; and she therefore lost no time in showing such attentions as she was enabled to afford to her new neighbour. Presents of fruit from her own gardens, as well as of flower-seeds and plants, were forwarded to Woodbine Cottage; and when Mrs. St. George was regularly settled there, May proceeded to visit her. The call was returned; and during the next two or three months they saw each other frequently. May did not, however, exactly comprehend her own feelings towards Mrs, St. George. At first, on hearing her sad tale, she had given her all her sweet-

est sympathy, and had even experienced a yearning to become her friend that she might have the privilege of consoling her: but as their acquaintance ripened, there were now and then moments when May disliked, even if she were not actually repelled by, the strange flashing from Mrs. St. George's dark eyes. On these occasions, however, those orbs were immediately veiled by their long ebon lashes; and an expression of deepest mournfulness would come over the lady's countenance. Then May was angry with herself for having even for a single instant thought that there was anything at all strange in those looks; and with a species of feeling of remorse she would redouble her attentions and throw an increase of affectionate solicitude into her manner towards Mrs. St. George.

When alone at Apsley Court after having paid or received one of these visits, May would deliberately ask herself what she really did think of Mrs. St. George, and what was the actual condition of her feeling towards her? But she could not precisely tell: there was a sort of vague bewilderment in her ideas whenever she thus strove to analyze them. Her generosity and her kindness prompted her to do all she could to settle her mind to the most favourable sentiment in respect to her new friend: but then would come the recollection of those occasional flashing looks—with perhaps the reminiscence likewise of some little peculiarity of language or of manner on Mrs. St. George's part, which had surprised her at the time and had even struck her as sinister: so that May frequently felt herself puzzled as to the veritable state of her feelings with regard to that lady. Our heroine was to a certain degree distressed at all that we have been explaining; and she would frequently reason with herself in this wise:—

"How is it that I cannot enjoy with enthusiasm the opportunity of a warm friendship which is thus offered me?—how is it that at times when I feel my heart yearning most towards her, it suddenly receives a shock, and recoils as it were from the object of its sympathy? How is it too that it occasionally appears to me as if I felt more for Mrs. St. George's sorrows than she herself feels?—how is it that when the discourse turns upon them the emotions excited within my own heart appear to me to be different from those which I see her experiencing? And yet mine are genuine; it is equally impossible that hers can be insincere. I cannot understand it!"

If May Middleton had been a little more experienced in the ways of the world—if she had been less unsophisticated and ingenuous than she really was—she would have been enabled to penetrate still more deeply into the actual state of her own impressions. She would have seen that there was in her mind the thought that while she herself was always sincere in sympathizing with Mrs. St. George, this lady on the other hand had to a certain extent the air of only performing a part instead of actually *feeling* it. But May's analysis of her own sentiments could not go so deep as to establish so strong a contrast: it was not merely her inexperience but likewise her generosity which kept her thus

hovering around the atmosphere of suspicion without actually plunging into it. She was too good, too kind, too confiding to arrive at a conclusion that would at once have placed Mrs. St. George in a very different light in her estimation: while on the other hand it was utterly incompatible with our heroine's nature to take credit to herself for a depth of feeling and a warmth of susceptibility in which the other was deficient.

From all that we have said, the reader will be prepared to learn that May Middleton resolved, as the only resource, to abandon herself blindly to the friendship which she had formed—to put away from herself, with all her power, whatsoever might appear unsatisfactory in it—to blame herself for injustice when feeling repelled by the lady's flashing looks—and never to attribute the cause of that repulsion to aught suspicious or sinister in respect to Mrs. St. George herself. That May should thus tutor her own mind to a particular course which had to break down several little impediments, must not be exactly deemed weakness, but must be taken as a proof of the natural excellence of her heart. Yet this friendship on our heroine's part was to a certain degree forced: it was not the fuit altogether of a spontaneous growth—it was nursed by an artificial warmth supplied by the fervour of her own generous nature. Such a friendship as this placed our heroine to a certain degree at the mercy of its object: that is to say, it gradually led her into a species of thraldom which she suspected not, but which was nevertheless the result of the influence that Mrs. St. George was by degrees establishing over her. May thought to herself—whenever she yielded an opinion to her friend, or resigned any little point of argument in which she had previously fancied her sentiments were settled—that it was merely the natural concession she was making to a superior mind; and as this impression grew upon her, she gradually began to look up to Mrs. St. George as one who was competent to assist her with advice or give her good counsel in case anything should transpire to render such friendly monition needful.

As for Farmer Middleton—he was so little accustomed to look beneath the surface of things—he was so naturally unsuspicious and confiding, that he had utterly failed to notice any of the little peculiarities on Mrs. St. George's part that had struck his daughter. He looked upon her as a very good kind woman—he was pleased with her manners—he was to a certain extent impressed with her beauty—he considered it a very painful thing that one who was yet young in the world should have experienced so much sorrow. Judging by the strict rectitude of her behaviour, and from the reports which had reached his ears at the time she first became the occupant of Woodbine Cottage, Mr. Middleton thought she was an excellent companion for his daughter; and thus, with the best possible intentions, he encouraged the intimacy.

One day—when the acquaintance was about three months' duration, and when it had progressed into a veritable intimacy—Miss Middleton was walking with Mrs. St. George through the spacious gardens and

pleasure-grounds attached to Apsley court. The conversation had been upon general topics: there was a brief pause; and then Mrs. St. George, stopping to gaze with apparent admiration upon the Court, said, "In a few months time, Miss Middleton, the end of the term of your mourning will arrive—and then you will doubtless throw open your splendid saloons for the reception of those guests with whom your position naturally leads you to associate."

"Barely six months have elapsed since the remains of my deceased uncle were consigned to the tomb," answered our heroine with mournful gravity; "and six months more must pass before the sounds of music, of laughter, and of gaiety, or the steps of dancers shall be heard within the walls of Apsley Court——"

"But those six months will soon pass, Miss Middleton," observed Mrs. St. George: "and then ——"

She stopped short—heaved a profound sigh—and walked somewhat rapidly along the gravel pathway. Our heroine was quickly by her side; and she gazed with astonishment upon her countenance, which she saw was deeply pensive.

"You cannot understand me?" resumed Mrs. St. George, with such touching plaintiveness in her tones. "Perhaps I am selfish—perhaps for your sake I ought to look forward with pleasurable anticipation to the time when you will be surrounded by admiring guests, and when you will have those recreations that will fully engross all your leisure. But it will be no happy period for me——"

"And why not?" asked May, though fancying that she partially conjectured the nature of her friend's thoughts.

"Because, my dear Miss Middleton," was that lady's response, "my own bruised and afflicted spirit will never again permit me to mingle in the gay scenes of society. I shall therefore see little of you then—I shall lose the companionship of one whom I esteem as the dearest friend that ever heaven sent me!"

"Not so," replied our heroine in a gentle voice, which was likewise tremulous with emotions. "If you think that I shall be forgetful of you and that I shall desert you for the sake of those mere acquaintances who from time to time may assemble at Apsley Court, you know little indeed of the true feelings of my heart."

"Pardon me, my dear Miss Middleton," said Mrs. St. George, taking her hand and pressing it with much apparent fervour: "I see that I have wronged you! Indeed, I ought to have known you better," she continued, with an air of growing abstraction, as if her emotions were overpowering her,—"not merely on account of your kindness towards me—nor on account of all the good which is spoken of you throughout the neighbourhood—but likewise on account"—and here she seemed to grow more abstracted still—"of those words which were breathed in my ear by one——"

Here she stopped short, as if suddenly recollecting herself, and as if grieved at having been led on in the abstraction of her thoughts to give utterance to something which she had not meant to say. Again did

our heroine survey her with surprise, and also with curiosity.

"I see that I have gone so far," said Mrs. St. George, "that some explanation of my meaning is necessary; and I will give it. But if I have never touched upon this topic before, you will attribute my silence to its true motive—you will give me credit for having been desirous to avoid a painful subject——"

"A painful subject?" repeated May: and she waited with evident suspense for Mrs. St. George to continue.

"Scarcely a year has elapsed—— But tell me, my dear young friend," she thus suddenly interrupted herself —"tell me"—and in a low hesitating voice, she added, "what was the last intelligence you received concerning one who was reared with you from infancy?"

"You mean poor Reuben Wallis," exclaimed our heroine, with a start of astonishment. "But wherefore do you thus question me? why—why——"

"Because that same Reuben Wallis," answered Mrs. St. George, "was not altogether unknown to me——"

"Is it possible?" ejaculated May: and then a deep blush suffused her countenance—and an anguished expression too swept over it—and her bosom swelled convulsively, as the memories of the past, and perhaps some thoughts in respect to the future, swept through her mind.

"It is possible—it is true," answered Mrs. St. George, with such a grave solemnity that it struck our heroine as something ominous of evil. "But tell me, my sweet friend, first of all—have you ever received any intelligence respecting that young man since he so suddenly disappeared from Burnside sixteen or seventeen months back?"

"Oh!" exclaimed our heroine, full of acutest suspense: "then you know it all? you are acquainted with those circumstances?——But yes! necessarily so! You may have heard the disappearance of Reuben Wallis spoken of in the neighbourhood——"

"I knew it all before I ever came into this neighbourhood," replied Mrs. St. George. "But answer my question—and then I will explain everything."

"The answer is," faltered May scarcely able to keep back her tears—for she had ever remorsefully regarded herself as the cause of Reuben's flight from that dwelling which was his home,—"the answer is that we have remained in complete ignorance of all that concerns him since he so abruptly left us."

"Let us change the conversation," said Mrs. St. George, as if anxious to turn aside from a painful topic, and as if vainly struggling to put off that grave solemnity from her countenance.

"No, no," murmured May; "you have something to reveal—I see that you have—and whatever it be, let me know it—keep me not in suspense! I implore you, my dear friend —I beseech and pray——"

"Oh, how foolish I was," ejaculated Mrs. St. George, as if bitterly angry with herself, "to suffer a syllable of all that to escape my lips!—what insensate want of caution! But I see that it is useless to give way to these self reproaches

—and I who would have concealed the painful truth for the purest and sincerest motives, must now reveal it!"

"I understand enough from your words and manner," said May, still speaking in a faltering voice, and scarcely able to keep her sobs,—"I understand that some evil has overtaken poor Reuben. I beseech and implore that you will keep me not in suspense! Let me know the worst, whatsoever it may be——let me know it!"

"Yes: you shall—you must!" said Mrs. St. George, who appeared to be greatly agitated. "I have gone too far to retreat. Know then——prepare yourself, my dear May—prepare yourself for a sudden shock——it is of death that I would speak—"

"Death!" murmured our heroine, shuddering from head to foot with a glacial terror: "death!"—and then her countenance became ashy pale, her eyes were fixed, and she stood statue-like as if suddenly petrified.

"Compose your feelings, my dear, dear friend," said Mrs. St. George, taking both her hands and pressing them in her own: "you have often and often comforted me—It is now my turn to be the consoler. Would that I were able to recall the words I have uttered!—would that I had never been led by my own unguarded folly to touch upon this subject! But, alas, the fatal truth is now told—Reuben Wallis is no more!"

For several minutes May uttered not a word: but she continued gazing in blank stupefaction upon Mrs. St. George. At length she said in a low deep voice, "Tell me all you know."

"You remember, my dear May," continued Mrs. St. George, "that I told you how I was the companion to an elderly lady who at her death left me a portion of her little property. I took up my abode in a lodging-house in a secluded suburb of the metropolis; and there for some while I dwelt. It must have been about a year or thirteen months back that an apartment in that same house was taken by a young man who had obtained an occupation of some kind on a gentleman's property in the neighbourhood. Scarcely however had he been there a week, when he was seized with a malignant fever; and such was the terror which his malady inspired, that neither the landlady nor the servant of the house would go near him. I could not remain in apathy or indifference—I could not allow a fellow-creature to perish for want of those ministerings which might perhaps tend to his recovery. I became his nurse: I did all that lay in my power to relieve his sufferings and to surround him with comforts. I watched by his bed-side day and night. But death was approaching with rapid strides; and in ten days he was no more. In his lucid intervals he had told me who he was—he had spoken with fervid gratitude of your father and yourself; and little did I then think that I should ever have an opportunity of appreciating the truth of those eulogies which flowed from his lips when mentioning your name, dear May!"

Again did Miss Middleton suffer several minutes to elapse ere she broken the silence which followed the brief but touching narrative of Mrs.

St. George; and then she said, "My heartfelt thanks, dearest, dearest friend—and those of my father likewise—for your noble generosity towards one in whom we were so deeply, deeply interested!"

The tears rained down the cheeks of our heroine; and for a long time her bosom was convulsed with grief—all the more poignant too on account of the self-reproaches to which she gave way.

"Oh!" she at length exclaimed, clasping her hands in despair, "what—what will my dear father say—he who loved Reuben as if he were his own son!"

"You must break it gently to him, my dear May," answered Mrs St. George; "and it is your duty to exercise a control over your own feelings, so as to be enabled to perform the part of comforter to Mr. Middleton. For more reasons than one," continued Mrs. St. George, in a profoundly mournful voice, "do I regret having been betrayed by my feelings—or rather by my abstraction—into this sad want of caution. When at the point of death, poor Reuben Wallis was perfectly conscious; and I asked him if he wished me to communicate with his friends when he should be no more?—'No,' he said, 'leave them in ignorance of my fate. If they know that I am gone, they would weep for me; and why should they be distressed on my account? But if they remain in ignorance of my death, they will consider that I am still abroad somewhere in the world; and when years hence some accident shall reveal to them how I went down prematurely to the grave, they will have ceased to think of me with any degree of regret, and their sorrow will be all the less on my behalf?'—It was thus that he spoke; and I resolved to follow his instructions. When I became acquainted with you and your esteemed father, I gathered from the few occasional words you both let drop that you were in total ignorance of Reuben Wallis's fate. I determined that you should remain so. You may remember that never until this day was his name mentioned by me; and I am at a loss to conceive how I could possibly have been so unguarded—so culpably deficient in caution——"

"Blame not yourself, Mrs. St. George," said our heroine, in a mild, plaintive voice; "it is better that these sad tidings should have thus been broken to me by the kind delicacy of a friend, than that they should have some day seized upon me when I was least prepared for them."

"Did you—did you love Reuben very much?" asked Mrs. St. George, putting the question in her softest tone, and with the air of one seeking the information only that she might pour forth her sympathy according to the response to be elicited.

"I loved him as a brother," murmured our heroine,—"as nothing more *then*—but yet——"

She ceased, and pressed Mrs. St. George's hand, as much as to imply that the topic was either too painful or too delicate—perhaps both—to be pursued. They retraced their way towards the mansion: Mrs. St. George now took her leave; and May shut herself up in her own chamber to commune with herself until her father

returned from the farm to which he had proceeded for a few hours. Then to his ears did May breathe the narrative which she had received from the lips of Mrs. St. George: the farmer was profoundly affected—so that he and his daughter mingled their tears together.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE GAMING HOUSE.

THE scene now changes to the great metropolis—but yet not near so great at the period of which we are writing (namely, 1781) as it is at the present day. Few of those suburbs which constitute the ever-growing arms of the mighty city, and which abound in pleasant villas with little patches of garden, were at that time in existence. Then on all sides London appeared to cease abruptly, and to be bordered by the fields: but now it is scarcely possible to draw a line at any particular point of its outskirt so as to be enabled to say that there it ceases. Very different too was the aspect of the metropolis between seventy and eighty years back from what it is now: the streets, feebly lighted with oil-lamps, were everywhere gloomy, and in many places dangerous by night—the shops of an evening presented no brilliant glare—and their decorations were contemptible indeed in comparison with the sumptuousness which many of them display at the present time. The best streets were ill-paved and dirty; the drainage was only partial and exceedingly defective even in the best neighbourhoods; and the dwellers in fashionable quarters, as well as the poor wretches that herded them, as they do now, in courts and alleys, were exposed to pestilential odours and annoyed by noxious effluvia. At that day no well-disciplined police acted as the guardians of the thoroughfares: a few ancient and helpless watchmen—as easily bullied as bribed, and constantly rendered the objects of roystering sport on the part of rakes and profligates—were the sole custodians of the streets.

At about the same date as the incident with which the previous chapter closed—namely, at the commencement of October—the scene which we are about to relate took place. It was nine o'clock in the evening—a drizzling rain was falling—the lamps, always dim, glimmered more dimly still, as if seen through a mist—and the air was bitterly cold. It seemed as if winter had set in prematurely. At the hour we have specified, Wilfrid Middleton, enveloped in an ample and handsome cloak, was traversing Leicester Square. His pace was hurried; and if anyone had peered beneath the broad brim of his hat it might have been observed that his countenance was flushed with wine. It might have been seen too that there was a sort of wild sinister light burning in his eyes, as if some strong passion were excited within him—and that an evil one. He muttered to himself as he proceeded hurriedly along; and the words he thus spoke were to the effect that unless Fortune favoured him that night, his position would be desperate. There was all the gambler personified in Wilfrid Middleton then!

Turning into some narrow street in the neighbourhood of Leicester

Squrae, Wilfrid knocked at a door, which was immediately opened by a short, dark-looking man, on whose ill-favoured countenance and shabby attire the light of a lamp suspended in the passage was shed down. He spoke some word of familiar recognition: but Wilfrid only flung a disdainful look on the door-keeper of that gambling-house; and hastily ascending the stairs, he passed into a room where several persons were engaged in play round a large table. Of these individuals some were easily to be singled out as belonging to the higher order—dissipated nobles and wealthy gentlemen making light work of their wealth: but others were of a lower grade—of that class indeed which seemed specially to be found within the atmosphere of gambling scenes, whether it were the hell itself, in the parlour of the sporting tavern, on the turf, at the prize ring, or in the cock-pit. But there—in that place—nobles and blacklegs, gentlemen and adventurers, were all upon a level; and perhaps those who were highest in social position considered it a much finer thing to heard thus with the lowest, than the latter did to be admitted to the society of the former.

Wilfrid was at once welcomed by the persons whom he thus found at this pandemonium: with some he shook hands—on others he bestowed only a familar nod of recognition; and then, as if burning with the fever-heat of his fatal and irresistible passion, he plunged headlong into the game. Flinging his cloak from off his shoulders upon the back of the chair in which he deposited himself, he produced rolls of bank-notes, and handfuls of gold from his pockets; and as his lips moved at the same time, none who looked on comprehended the meaning of the silently-spoken words that wavered there: but they were to the effect that it was his *all* that he had just produced from about his person!

He was, as we have said, speedily deep in the game: but he found no difficulty in getting his stakes covered—for the nobles and gentlemen who were there were prepared to gamble as adventurously as himself. From the very first Wilfrid appeared to have a run of luck; and by the remarks which it elicited, this vein of good fortune was evidently unusual with him: his own manner, looks, and words likewise proved that it was so. Indeed at this pandemonium, and at some other places of like resort, the greater portion of his legacy as well as of the proceeds arising from the sale of his commerical warehouse had been swallowed up—with the exception, however, of a thousand pounds he had remitted to his wife according to the compact between them. The five or six hundred pounds which he now displayed upon the table, when first taking his seat on this particular evening, constituted the residue of all his possessions; and it was no wonder therefore, accustomed to deep play as he was, that he had muttered to himself, while proceeding to the den, something about his position being a desperate one if ill-luck should sweep away all that he had about him. But, as we have said, it appeared destined to be otherwise: for in less than an hour the sum he had brought with him was exactly doubled.

At a little side-table two men were seated,—smoking, dirinking and playing at cards. One was a tall burly individual, with an appearance half farmer-like, half sportsman-like. He had a very short neck and a very large head: he was not above forty—but his hair was grizzly and grey: he had no whiskers—and his entire face was one of deep purple colour, as if his veins ran with brandy and port wine. His name was Cranston; but he was more familiarly known by the diminutive of his Christian name, which was Edward. Ned Cranston had run through a considerable fortune; and now he lived upon his wits—or, in other terms, by the thousand and one unscrupulous ways in which a ruined profligate could alone obtain the means of subsistence.

Cranston's companion at the card-table was some five or six years older, and had fierce iron grey wiskers and moustaches. He was an individual of about the middle height—somewhat thin and spare, but nevertheless strongly built: he had a determined, almost ferocious look--and a military appearance. A shabby blue surtout coat, elaborately frogged and braided all over the breast, was buttoned up to his throat,—the tight-fitting standup collar giving additional compressure to the black leather stock which seemed almost to choke him. A cap, with a gold band and a long tassel, was perched over his right ear—thus adding a devil-me-care look of defiance to the mingled expression of dissipation and ferocity which characterized his countenance. This personage was known as Captain O' Halloran: for he was a native of the Emeral Island, and certainly not one of the best specimens of its population. He had once been in the army, and had borne no higher rank than that of lieutenant: but when he was cashiered for mal-practices and was therefore no longer in the army at all, he cooly dubbed himself captain, and had ever since been known by that rank. Like his friend Ned Cranston, he lived upon his wits; he could be a mean sponge or a ferocious bully—a fawning sycophant or a base vile extortioner: he could cajole or threaten—cringe or bluster—speak fair words or foul—whine or swear, just according to the circumstances in which he was placed or the individuals with whom he had to deal.

Ned Cranston and his friend Captain O'Halloran were ostensibly playing a game of cards together: but they were in reality keeping a sharp eye, keen and furtively bent, upon the proceedings at the other table. Rapid and sinister were the glances which they exchanged when Wilfrid Middleton produced his bank-notes and gold; and then they appeared to be talking in quite a cool, comfortable, and indifferent manner. As the piles of gold and the heap of bank-notes accumulated by Wilfrid's side, Cranston and O'Halloran every now and then darted upon each other similar looks as before—but still without attracting the notice of any of the players at the other table.

"By the bye," said one of the noblemen, during a brief pause in the game, while refreshments were being handed round by a waiter,—"what whas that I heard the other night of Tom Hamer being set upon by two or three fellows just at the

top of the street here, and so desperately wounded that his life is despaired of?"

"It is all perfectly true", answered one of the gentlemen players. "I called to see him this morning at his lodgings in the Adelphi. He was only just able to speak a few words and for my part I think he is a doomed man."

"But who were the villains?" asked some one.

"That he cannot tell," was the reply. "All he can recollect is that he was set upon in a moment at the top of this street: the rogues had no doubt purposely extinguished the lamp—it was pitch dark—and Hamer was felled by a blow from a club or with the butt-end of a pistol—his surgeon thinks the latter."

"He had just taken away six or seven hundred pounds from this table," said the man who acted a *croupier*, or superintendent of the game.

"Yes—but the villains did not get it," continued the gentleman who was narrating the occurrence: "for it would appear that a bevy of young blades, out upon a roystering excursion, and who had just robbed three or four old watchmen of their lanterns, came suddenly upon the spot at the very moment Hamer was struck down, and while one of his assailants was stooping to rifle his person. This fellow and his comrades—whoever they were, and in whatsoever number the gang might be—took to their heels and fled so precipitately that there was no chance of pursuing them."

"By jingo, Captain!" ejaculated Cranston at this moment, "it's your game. How lucky you are."

"Now for another," exclaimed O'Halloran, and these two worthies appeared to be so intent upon their own particular pastime as not to take the slightest notice of the discourse that was going on at the larger table.

"One ought to carry pistols about one's person," remarked the nobleman who had first spoken, "when issuing from this place at night-time."

"I always carry pistols," observed Wilfrid Middleton. "I would not trust myself for a moment at night-time in certain quarters of London without them."

"Pass your cigar-case, Ned," exclaimed Captain O'Halloran.

"You always have a run of luck when you have a cigar in your mouth," vociferated Cranston, with a great coarse laugh, which seemed indeed the most appropriate sort of merriment to issue from his huge burly form.

"You are right, Middleton," said the nobleman—the conversation thus progressing at the larger table—"quite right to carry pistols. But where do you stow them?"

"Where are they most handy, and can be caught hold of in an instant, one in each grasp," replied Wilfrid. "Look!"—and holding up his cloak, he displayed a pocket fashioned within the lining on each side, so that when the garment was on him the pistols were just where his hands would be. "But come! let us go on with the game. I have doubled my money—and I mean to treble it—if

you have spirit enough to let me," he added, with the greedy look and laugh of the gamester.

"We will endeavour to get ours back again, and yours along with it," said the nobleman,—who was an elderly man, and who spoke with the easy indifferent air of one who made gambling a pastime, and who being able to afford to lose was not dependent upon the chances of winning.

The game was continued; and as the clock proclaimed the hour of midnight, Wilfrid started up with a wild joyous laugh, exclaiming. "By heaven! I have done what I said—I have trebled what I brought—and I play no more on this occasion."

"What! are you off, Captain?" shouted out Ned Cranston at this moment.

"Have you forgotten, man," demanded O'Halloran, "that I have an appointment to sup with a certain fair dame who shall be nameless, but who never receives visitors till midnight."

"True—I forgot!" responded Cranston. "Good-night, Captain."

O'Halloran returned the compliment; and having exchanged a few words with some of the others present, he issued from the room.

"I will play no more!" cried Wilfrid Middleton in response to the entreaties which were addressed to him on the subject: "but I will remain half-an-hour to drink a glass of wine. Here, Ned Cranston, come and join us. I have been in luck's way to-night."

"Have you indeed, Mr. Middleton?" asked the burly individual, with an air of surprise. "Well, I really thought it was all the other way"

"Oh, you were so engaged, Ned," exclaimed Wilfrid, "with keeping your friend, the Captain, company, that you had not an eye or an ear for what was going on at this table."

"True enough, Mr. Middleton," rejoined Cranston. "I have managed to lose ten gold pieces to O'Halloran—and that is enough in my humble way. I'll take just one glass—and then I must be off to snatch an hour or two of sleep: for I've got to be at Hounslow to-morrow morning at six, to second the Reading Pet who fights the Yorkshire Yokel for fifty guineas."

Some bets were immediately offered and taken as to the result of the pending conflict just announced by Ned Cranston; and this individual, having remained for a quarter of an hour to toss off a few bumpers, bade the party good-night, and took his leave. Further attempts were made to induce Wilfrid to renew the game: but for a wonder he was resolute; and as it was now close upon one o'clock, he determined to be off. The others not being disposed to depart as yet, plunged into a fresh game; and Wilfrid, putting on his cloak, quitted the room.

On issuing from the house, he slipped a crown-piece into the hand of the door-keeper; and drawing down his hat over his face, as well as wrapping his mantle well about him, to protect himself from the rain which was now pouring in torrents, he hurried away from the gambling-house. Crossing Leicester Square, he entered a narrow tortuous street which led towards the bottom of St. Martin's Lane; but he had not advanced many paces

before he was struck by its more than usual gloom: and then he all in an instant recollected the discourse that had taken place in the gambling-house in respect to Mr. Hamer. A glance showed him that where a lamp ought to burn, darkness now prevailed. His first impulse was to turn back: but the next instant he scorned himself for the thought—for Wilfrid Middleton was no coward. He therefore grasped both his pistols, and pursued his way. His lodgings were in the Strand—and this was the nearest cut to take him in that direction: indeed it was the route he almost invariably followed of a night when leaving the particular gambling-house which he had just quitted.

The circumstance of the extinguished lamp had at first struck him as ominous: but he now said to himself, "It may, after all, be the wind that has done it, or the rain penetrating through. Nevertheless, I will be upon my guard:"—and his hands firmly clutched the pistols beneath his cloak,—the folds of which he held back, despite the rain, in such a manner that his arms should not be impeded thereby, in case he had to make sudden use of his weapons.

Only a few paces farther had he advanced, when from the entrance of a court a form glided out so stealthily and abruptly that its stalwart arms were tightly clasped all in a moment around Wilfrid Middleton, who had not a single instant's leisure to produce his pistols. The way in which he was thus seized upon, had the effect of pinioning his own arms tight to his sides beneath his cloak; and that grasp was so powerful that it was as if the stoutest cord had been coiled round him. It was so dark too that he had not the slightest notion of the appearance of his assailant: nor indeed was he allowed much time for conjecture—for he was lifted completely off his feet and deposited upon his back in the street,—his assailant throwing himself down on the top of him. Another person was at hand; and a heavy blow with some weapon was levelled at Wilfrid's head: but fortunately he evaded it at the instant by a desperate struggle that he made—and he shouted for help. Quick as lightning another individual appeared upon the spot; and through the dimness of the place and hour his keen eye evidently caught enough to show him what was going on; for with one tremendous and well-aimed blow he hurled away the desperado who had levelled the weapen at Wilfrid, and was then just in the act of levelling it again. The fellow who had at first pinioned Middleton, and had thrown himself on the top of him, started in a moment to his feet, and rushed away in one direction—while his comrade, with equal celerity gaining his own feet, sped off in the other.

Wilfrid's deliverer seemed perfectly contented with having thus saved him, and made no movement to follow either of the desperadoes: but in a kind voice he expressed his hope that he whom he had succoured was not hurt?

"Nothing beyond a few bruises," replied Wilfrid, rising from the ground and replacing his hat which had fallen off. "A thousand thanks to you, sir, whoever you are——"

"That voice! is it possible?" exclaimed the deliverer, speaking with all the excitement of amaze. "Surely, surely it is Mr. Wilfrid Middleton?"

"Yes—that is my name," was the response. "But you—tell me who you are; for your voice sounds not entirely unfamiliar to my ears—and yet I know not——"

"This way! this way!" interrupted Middleton's deliverer; and clutching Wilfrid by the arm, he drew him rapidly onward to that extremity where the street joined the bottom of St. Martin's Lane. "Look!—do you know me?" he asked, suddenly stopping under the light of a lamp.

"Know you?" said Wilfrid—and for a few moments he gazed in a strange bewilderment upon the countenance of his deliverer.—fancying that he recognised it, and scarcely able to convince himself that it was really the same which he took it to be. "Yes, yes—there can be no doubt!" he suddenly ejaculated. "But this change!"—and his eyes quickly glanced over the individual's form from head to foot. "Is it possible?"

"Yes—it is I!" said the other: and the next instant he disappeared from Wilfrid's view, so rapidly did he dart away.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE GAMING-HOUSE AGAIN.

For upwards of a minute did Wilfrid Middleton remain standing in a short of stupified amazement on the spot where his deliverer had left him: then muttering to himself some renewed expression of surprise, with which deep annoyance was blended, he slowly pursued his way towards his lodgings. Yes—slowly he walked, notwithstanding the rain was pouring down in torrents: but he now heeded no longer the inclemency of the night—he scarcely perceived it—so gloomily absorbed were his reflections in the encounter which had just taken place. It was not indeed until he entered his dwelling that he turned his thoughts upon another subject, and which was intimately connected with that encounter—namely, the attack which had been made upon him.

As we have already said while describing that transaction, the darkness of the street was so profound, and the whole affair passed with such rapidity, that Wilfrid Middleton had no chance of obtaining a glimpse of the countenances of the desperadoes who assailed him. Not a word had been spoken by either: and thus not even their voices had supplied a conjecture towards the establishment of their identity with any two acquaintances of his. Yet the suspicion was strong in his mind that he had not become the object of a mere random assault, nor that anybody else passing at the time would have been equally assailed: he felt assured that he had been purposely waylaid. He was in the habit of passing along that street on returning home from the gambling-house; and on this particular night he had issued from that pandemonium with a considerable amount of money in his possession. Then too, the circumstances of Mr. Hamer having been stopped a few days previously, likewise on departing from the gaming-house with a large sum about him, seemed to con-

firm Wilfrid's suspicion that there was an organized plan to waylay and plunder those who were previously known to have large amounts in their pockets. Were the managers of the gaming-house in league with any such desperadoes? For an instant Wilfrid's suspicions pointed to a couple of individuals: but the next moment he said to himself, "No—it is scarcely possible that *they* would have recourse to such villanies.

Wilfrid had now about eighteen hundred pounds in his possession; and when he awoke on the following day, he was flushed with the hope that fortune had taken a positive turn in his favour. This idea—so exulting a one for the inveterate gamester—somewhat deadened the effects of that annoyance he had experienced from the unexpected encounter with a certain person on the preceding night. The reader may be assured that when evening came again, Wilfrid bent his way to the gaming-house in the vicinage of Leicester Square; and he took with him the greater portion of the funds at his command, with the hope of increasing them in the same proportion as on the previous night. The room was more than usually crowded—play had already commenced—and the personage who staked the largest amounts was a nobleman who bore the title of the Earl of Normanton. This individual was about forty years of age—tall, handsome, and finely formed—of aristocratic demeanour, and of the most tasteful elegance in his toilet. He had an aquiline profile: his countenance was naturally of a classic oval—but with the effects of late hours and dissipation it seemed elongated: His cheeks were pale from the same cause; and as he played with the utmost calmness, there was not the slightest flush of excitement upon those cheeks.

Wilfrid, upon entering the room, experienced a sensation of pleasure on beholding Lord Normanton, against whom he immediately purposed to pit himself: for the Earl was accustomed to play for large stakes, and was notorious for his ill-luck at the gaming-table. Although he seemed to pursue the game with such cold impassive looks, yet one would have thought that he must have in reality experienced the internal excitement of pleasure—or else he must have entertained the gambler's infatuated hope that fortune would speedily take a complete turn in his favour. A few minutes' contemplation of the game showed Wilfrid Middleton that the Earl was losing, as usual; and therefore the former flattered himself that his own vein of luck would prevail.

At the card-table in the corner, Ned Cranston and Captain O'Halloran were pursuing their usual game, and indulging in their wonted recreation of strong liquor and cigars. As Wilfrid entered, he flung upon these two individuals a quick searching look; but they met it with so much honest frankness, and welcomed him with such perfect absence of constraint, that he once more felt the flashing suspicion become extinguished in his mind. He was too eager for play to begin immediately to relate his adventure of the preceding evening; and he was soon deep in the game,—his principal antagonist being the Earl of Normanton.

At first the tide of fortune was altogether in Wilfrid's favour: the piles of gold and the bank-notes accumulated before him: but after a while that tide began to turn. Being too confident that his star was in the ascendant, he played with an avidity which outstripped the usual calculations by which an accomplished gamester is wont to regulate his proceedings: while, on the other hand, the Earl of Normanton's calmness began to avail him in a proportionate degree as the recklessness of his antagonist increased. Still Wilfrid played on, though the piles of notes and gold were diminishing before him. Then there came a brief pause, during which the waiters handed round refreshments; and now Wilfrid, bethinking himself of the previous night's adventure, began to relate it. When thus entering upon the narrative, he glanced for a moment, but furtively, towards Ned Cranston and O'Halloran: he perceived that they became his listeners as well as the rest—but their countenances betrayed nothing to justify those suspicions which more than once had for an instant flitted through Wilfrid's brain. He narrated the tale just as we have described it to our readers—with the single exception, however, of abstaining from the mention of the fact that in his deliverer he had recognised some one who was previously known to him.

"This becomes serious!" said one of the gentlemen present: and then he made some allusion to the attack upon Mr. Hamer a few nights previously.

"But I thought," said another gentleman, "that you carried your pistols, Middleton, in such a manner that they were always immediately available?"

"Have I not explained," cried Wilfrid, "how the fellow who first assailed me wound his arm so tightly about my person that he pinioned my own immovably down to my sides. I am not deficient in strength—but I must candidly confess that he was far the stronger of the two."

"It is very strange," exclaimed Ned Cranston: "but as I left the house last night I observed a couple of men on the opposite side of the street: and they followed me into Leicester Square,—when I suddenly turned round with the intention of putting a question or two; but they disappeared in a moment. I had my suspicions at the time—but really had no leisure to take any further notice of the matter; for it was very late, and I had to be at Hounslow this morning by six on account of the prize fight that came off."

The mention of this pugilistic encounter speedily turned the discourse into another channel; and then the game was resumed. Wilfrid continued to experience a vein of ill-luck; but still he played with a recklessness which merged more and more into desperation as his losses increased. By the time the clock which hung in the room proclaimed the hour of one in the morning, every guinea he had brought with him had passed over to his antagonists,—the Earl of Normanton being the principal winner. We have said that Wilfrid had supplied himself with nearly all his funds ere seeking the gaming-house

on this particular evening; he had however left some three hundred pounds at his lodgings; and starting up from his chair, he exclaimed, "It his yet early, my lord—and if you have no objection to await my return I will hasten home and procure the where-with to renew the game."

"It is not necessary, Mr. Middleton," answered the Earl: state the sum that you require—and I shall be happy to become your banker."

Wilfrid was on the point of mentioning the precise amount which he had left at his lodgings, and which he therefore knew that in case of loss he should be enabled to repay: but the sudden thought struck him that the larger the resources at his command, the grater would be his chance of retrieving the misfortunes of the night; and he therefore said, "Thanks for your kindness, my lord. Lend me five hundred!"

The Earl of Normanton at once passed over this amount: and the game was renewed. Then did Wilfrid Middleton indeed display in all their intensity those varied phases of feeling through which the gamester of excitable temperament is doomed to pass. When fortune declared itself in his favour and he gathered up a large stake, the light of joy burnt with a sinister glare in his eyes: but when ill-luck returned and his wagered pile of gold passed over to his antagonist, his countenance became of a deadly pallor—his lips grew ashy white and quivering—and he bit them almost till the blood came, in order to keep back the imprecations which rose up to within the very point of utterance. And then too, while the dice were being thrown, and loss or gain were alike held in suspense,—how acute, how fevered, how almost frenzied was the excitement of mingled hope and fear which he experienced!—how his eyes were riveted upon those little pieces of ivory on the cast of which so much for him depended! how the veins swelled up, blue and knotted like cords, upon his forehead—how the perspiration stood above those corrugating brows—how parched feft his throat—how feverishly dry his lips! There were moments when the naturally handsome countenance of Wilfrid Middleton appeared absolutely hideous with the fierce working of his passions. But in strange and striking contrast to the aspect which he thus presented, Lord Normanton sat calm and impassive, at least to all outward appearance. When he spoke, it was in a quiet easy manner, and with the natural intonations of his voice: whereas the voice of Wilfrid was sometimes hoarse and sometimes hollow,—now expressive of desparation or dejection—now changing into accents of fierce exultation.

The play went on—the clock struck three—and Wilfrid found himself penniless. He could have dashed his head against the wall—he could have smitten his clenched fist violently upon the table—he could have yelled out with despair, or have vented his rage in bitter imprecations—he could even have felt a satisfaction in proclaiming himself to be a totally ruined man, and in ferociously charging all around him with the authorship of that ruin: but he was compelled to restrain himself. He had a sufficiency of

self-possession left to make him aware that if he by deed or word rashly and intemperately, betrayed the utter destruction of his fortunes, his very credit itself would be annihilated in an instant: and it was only by his credit now that he could hope to find the means of retrieveing his ill-luck. He therefore, by a mighty effort, composed his outward demeanour; and having tossed off a bumper of wine, affected to laugh at his losses—observing to the Earl of Normanton, "Your lordship shall give me my revenge to-morrow night."

"With infinite pleasure," responded the nobleman: "but it will not be here. I have a party of friends to entertain at Normanton Manor to-morrow evening: but if you can favour me with your company, you will experience a welcome."

Wilfrid at once accepted the invitation; and then, as a thought struck him, he said, "But you must be cautious, my lord, how you leave this house with all that money about your person."

"My carriage is waiting," was the Earl's calm response: "indeed it must have been in attendance some hours—for I had not purposed to remain here so late."

The party now broke up: Normanton went away in his carriage—Cranston and O'Halloran lingered for a few minutes to see whether any one would invite them to partake of wine; but as no such invitation was proffered, they sauntered from the place together. The other players proceeded in their respective directions; and Wilfrid took his own way through the narrow street towards Charing Cross—muttering to himself as he threaded it, "As well attempt to rob the veriest beggar crawling upon the pavement as to plunder me to-night!"

He passed on unmolested—gained his lodgings—and retired to bed in almost uttter desperation of feeling. After a few hours' feverish sleep he arose with a racking headache, and in such a condition of despondency that he felt as if it were scarcely safe to use his razor with his own hand, lest instead of applying it to his chin he should be tempted to draw it desperately across his throat. His position was indeed a perplexing and almost appalling one. He had five hundred pounds to pay the Earl of Normanton—and only three hundred wherewith to liquidate the liability. It was a debt of honour, and must be settled the instant he crossed the threshold of Normanton Manor in the evening—if indeed he could accept the invitation at all. But upon the payment of this debt depended all his hope of retrieving his ruined fortunes. That debt once paid, and be could easily on some pretext play on credit in the evening with the Earl. If he were to win, so much the better: but if he were to lose, the exposure of his ruin would become inevitable. Nevertheless, he hoped, as every gamester does, that fortune would once more turn in his favour; and therefore it was of vital consequence that he should be enabled to present himself at the Earl of Normanton's in the evening. Yet how to obtain the extra two hundred pounds to make the required amount? If Hamer were well enough, he could apply to him.

but that gentleman still continued in a most dangerous condition. Wilfrid reviewed the circle of his acquaintances: but his thoughts could not settle upon any one who was likely to accommodate him with the loan which he needed.

"Fool and madman that I was," he muttered in bitterness to himself, "to fling that thousand pounds away upon Rosalind! How do I know that she is working in my interest? I hear nothing from her—she does not write to me: all I know is that she is living——But, Ah!" he ejaculated, thus suddenly interrupting imself: "this reminds me that if she does not write to me, I at least ought to have written to *her*—to tell her of that encounter——for if she be *really* working in my interest—and perhaps after all she is—she ought to be made aware of that incident. It may not be without its importance. And yet, Oh!" he cried, wringing his hands for a moment, "if utter ruin is to overtake me now—if to-night affords me no opportunity of retrieving my ill-luck, but on the contrary leads to the exposure of my penniless condition—every hope in *that* quarter"—and he alluded to May Middleton—"will be destroyed! Not all the cunning of Rosalind, not all the arts and duplicities of which she is capable, will avail to carry out her purpose! Branded as a ruined gamester—incapable of paying my debts of honour—convicted of having played on credit, without the means of liquidating the money lost—such, such will be my position!"

Wilfrid's painful meditations were at this moment interrupted by a knock at this chamber-door; and the servant of the loding-house informed him that two gentlemen were waiting to speak to him in the parlour. He inquired who they were; and speedily discovered from the hasty description which the domestic gave that they must be Ned Cranston and Captain O'Holloran. Wondering what these men could possibly want, Wilfrid hastened to complete his toilet; and speedily joined them in his sitting-room, where they were awaiting him.

"We are come to breakfast with you, my boy," exclaimed Captain O'Halloran in an easy familiar manner; "and it may be to have a little private conversation on matters of importance."

"What matters?" inquired Wilfrid, eagerly: for in the desperate state of his circumstances, as well as of his feelings, he clutched at the idea that probably these men might in some way be enabled to assit him.

"Let us eat and drink first," responded Ned Cranston, with one of his huge coarse laughs; "and we shall be in all the better humour to discuss the business that has brought us here: for I can assure you it is of importance—at least if you take it in the light that we think you will——"

"Well, well, then," said Wilfrid, impatiently, "we will breakfast first."

The domestic was summoned—the meal was served up—and the guests appeared well disposed to do ample justice to it. Wilfrid grew more and more impatient as their appetite seemed to increase with every mouthful they ate instead of being appeased; he chafed and fumed inwardly,

and could scarcely prevent himself from outwardly betraying how he hung upon the tenter-hooks of suspense—for he felt more and more convinced, by a few occasional words which the Captain and Ned Cranston let drop, that the object of their visit *did* regard his own embarrassed circumstances. At length the two guests appeared to be fatigued of eating; and the business which had brought them was entered upon.

CHAPTER XXVII.

NED CRANSTON AND CAPTAIN O'HALLORAN.

Ned Cranston was the first to speak; but ere he opened his lips to give utterance to a single word of explanation, he exchanged divers significant looks with his comrade, as if rather diffident to commence and seeking encouragement from that individual. This encouragement was conveyed by sundry impatient nods and knowing winks on the part of O'Halloran; and then Mr. Cranston apeared to be fitted for the part he had undertaken.

"We are going to be very candid with you, friend Middleton," he haid; "and all that passes within these four walls, is just as sacred, you know, as if it was never uttered at all. Isn't that it, O'Halloran?"

"Just so," replied the Captain. "Proceed, Ned."

"Well, friend Middleton," resumed Mr. Cranston, "there's no use denying the fact that you are at the end of your resources, and what we English call hard up."

"What do you mean?" demanded Wilfrid, sharply: for he did not choose to admit anything until he had ascertained what his visitors were driving at, so that he might be enabled to form an opinion as to whether he should be candid with them or not.

"I mean exactly what I say," answered Cranston. "Don't I, Captain? Don't I mean exactly what I say?"

"Exactly," replied O'Halloran: then turning to Wilfrid, he added, "Ned Cranston is expressing *my* view as well as his own; and this is that you are what he has so beautifully and poetically expressed—hard up."

"And if I were," said Wilfrid, with a momentary expression of ghastliness flitting over his countenance, as he felt how painful his position really was,—"have you come with the intention of assisting me?"

"That is our very aim," ejaculated O'Halloran. "But honest Ned Cranston shall tell you more about it."

"I wish he would make haste," observed Wilfrid: "for do you know that this beating about the bush begins to tire me?"

"Patience, patience, friend Middleton," said the burly Cranston. "You won't deny that you are hard up? No—you can't. O'Halloran and I are men of the world; and we could tell by your looks last night that your thoughts and feelings were none of the pleasantest when Normanton so coolly pocketed your last stake. Pardon me—but there was a moment when you seemed just about as comfortable as a toad under a harrow. Didn't he look as comfortable, O'Halloran, as a toad under a harrow?"

"Just about," responded the Captain,—"or as a cat in a hot oven."

Wilfrid's countenance flushed with indignation; and he was about to

give vent to some angry expressions,—when he thought it better to curb his feelings and suffer the fellows to proceed in their own fashion. He therefore said coldly, "You are pleased, gentlemen, to indugle in merry similitudes at my expense; but as I give you credit for friendly intentions—or at least business-like ones——"

"Ah, that's the way to put it!" exclaimed Ned Cranston, with a loud boisterous laugh; "business-like intentions! We take it for granted, therefore, that you are reduced to certain straits, and that you don't very well know how to extricate yourself. You see, my dear Middleton, we are sufficiently acquainted with affairs to be able to put two and two together and arrive at certain conclusions. We have seen how luck has been almost constantly against you until the night before last,—but how completely it turned again last night; and, therefore, it requires no ghost to tell us that the legacy of five thousand, which you received at the old man's death down in the country, must have flitted away by this time. All this we know; and unless you've got the philosopher's stone—which we don't, think you have——Do we think he has, O'Halloran?"

"No, we don't," responded the Captain: "and therefore, as you were about to observe, Ned, we have come to the conclusion that he is what the ancient Romans as well as the modern Greeks call *hard up*."

"Granting, for argument's sake, that all this is true," said Wilfrid, "what have you to propose, gentlemen?"—and while forcing himself to speak civilly, he inwardly hated them for the mingled coarseness, levity, flippancy, and insolence, as well as repulsive familiarity which marked their discourse and their manner.

"Come, you must be frank with us," said Ned Cranston; "and we will come to the point. Can you, or can you *not* pay the five hundred pounds you borrowed of Lord Normanton?"

"And suppose," answered Wilfrid, "that I said I cannot——what then?"

"We take it for granted that you can *not* pay the money," continued Cranston: "don't we take it for granted, O'Halloran?"

"We do, Ned," rejoined that gentleman: "it is what's called a self-evident proposition—a thing I never could understand at school, but which I'm mighty ready to catch at now——such for instance as having no money nor credit to get a dinner—in which case it is self-evident you must go without. But proceed Ned:"

"The next thing, friend Middleton," resumed Cranston, "is to ascertain how much you *can* pay of the sum due to his lordship: and we think it will be somewhere about three hundred pounds?"

Wilfrid started as he thus discovered that his precise circumstances were known to his visitors: but he said nothing.

"There, you see!" continued Ned Cranston: "you yourself corroborated by that start of yours what after all was only a conjecture on our side. So you may understand how every look, movement, and word of yours

were last night fathomed and interpreted by us. Now, you see, the fact is, the night before last you took away a matter of eighteen hundred pounds—last night you brought with you and lost fifteen hundred—and you proposed to return home and fetch more. Well, it might have been a matter of three hundred which you had left as a reserve. Therefore, having borrowed five hundred, you have got three or thereabouts towards the payment. Those were our calculations. Wer'n't those our calculations, O' Halloran?

"They were," rejoined the Captain; "and there's no doubt as to their correctness."

"And if so," observed Wilfrid, still full of the acutest suspense, "are you come to lend me the remaining, two hundred, or to put me in the way of obtaining that sum?"

"That is one of our objects," answered Ned Cranston. "Is it not one of our objects, O' Halloran?"

Wilfrid gave utterance to an exclamation of joy,—thus involuntarily betraying how correct were the keen calculations of his visitors, and how welcome was the promise which they had just held out. They comprehended all this, and rapidly exchanged significant looks. But all in a moment a damp fell upon Wilfrid's spirits, as the question sprang up into his mind—how were these two men, who were notoriously far from well off, to advance him such a sum as two hundred pounds?

"There again we know what is passing in your mind!" observed Ned Cranston. "You think it is odd that we should have two hundred pounds to lend——and so it would be—very odd! Would it not be odd, O'Halloran?"

"I rather think so," responded the gentleman thus appealed to. "But come to the point, Ned—and tell him about the Jew.

"To be sure!" exclaimed Cranston: "that is just what I was about to touch upon. Well, friend Middleton, you must know, that there's a certain respectable jew of our acquaintance, who only charge fifty per cent. for money, and carefully thrusts his debtors into gaol if they don't pay. O' Halloran and I have seen our friend this morning: we have made certain representations—very flattering to you; and the long and short of it is, he is disposed to advance you a couple of hundred pounds on your bill for three hundred, payable a month after date."

"This is indeed coming to the point!" exclaimed Wilfrid, unable to conceal his joy at the announcement: but then, as a thought struck him, he said in a more serious manner, "And what motive have you gentleman, in thus acting as my friends all of a sudden?"

"Business-like intentions, my dear fellow!" replied Cranston significantly. "In fact, we three must row together in the same boat. Do you begin to understand?"

"What do you mean?" asked Wilfrid, his indignation suddenly reviving at the bare fact of being invited in any way to form a league with men whom he both hated and despised.

"Do you, or do you *not* intend to borrow the money of the Jew?" demanded Cranston.

"Certainly!" responded Wilfrid, anxious to see to what further explanations his answer would lead.

"Very good," said Cranston. "Is it not very good, O'Halloran?"

"More than good," responded this worthy; "it is capital—excellent!"

"Very well, then," cried Cranston; "we will go a step further. You will have the money, friend Middleton, in your pocket to liquidate your debt to the Earl of Normanton this evening; for we did not fail to notice that you accepted his invitation to the Manor. I don't think he honoured us with an invite, O' Halloran——Did he honour us?"

"No: but it was sheer forgetfulness on his part," replied the Captain, self-sufficiently. "Proceed, Ned!"

"Well, friend Middleton," continued Cranston, "You are going to the Manor this evening—there will be play after dinner—and his lordship will give you an opportunity of having your revenge. But suppose you can't take it—suppose you lose a good round sum,—playing upon credit, mind! as you must do,—and suppose that to-morrow morning you can't make up your losses. What then? It is all over with Wilfrid Middleton; and he may as well go and hang himself. Mayn't he as well go and hang himself, O'Halloran?"

"Just as well," answered the Captain. "Continue, Ned—and specify the other alternative."

"I'm coming to it in a canter," answered Cranston. "I've shown you, friend Middleton, what it will be if you lose: but I need not tell you how happy you will be to win. Normanton has plenty of money and plays deep; you know as well as I do he will go on playing all night, even against an inveterate vein of ill-luck, rather than appear to shrink back like a coward. Suppose then, friend Middleton—only just suppose, you know, that we show you *how* to win."

"Show me how to win?" said Wilfrid, mechanically repeating the other's words: then, as a suspicion flashed to his mind, he exclaimed, "Ah, I understand you! Yes—show me how to win, and rest assured I shall not fail to benefit by the lesson, nor shall you fail to profit by it."

"There! that's business!" ejaculated Cranston. "Is it not business, O'Halloran?"

"It is, Ned," was the response. "And now put the finishing stroke upon it: for I see that our friend Middleton is coming to a point with us in all respects."

"Look here," continued Cranston: and having fumbled for a few moments in one of the capacious pockets of his waistcoat, he produced a couple of dice.

Wilfrid now most fully comprehended the meaning of his visitors; and the man who had hesitated not to seek his cousin's hand though he had a wife living—nor subsequently had quailed at the idea of representing that wife as dead—nor had felt the slightest compunction when penetrating into the chamber of death for the purpose of stealing a will in order to destroy it,—such a man as this, we say, was by no means likely to be very much shocked nor to hesitate at the idea of using the dishonest dice for the purpose of retrieving his ruined fortunes. We

need not chronicle any more of the conversation which took place on this occasion between himself and his two visitors; suffice it to say that they explained to him the exact uses of those dice—how that inasmuch as they were loaded with lead, each on one particular side, they were sure to fall out of the box upon the table in a certain way, so that it was easy for him to make his calculations and lay his bets accordingly. Matters being thus settled, and an understanding being arrived at as to the share of his anticipated winnings that was subsequently to be handed over to his two worthy preceptors in the art of cheating—they all three proceeded to the residence of the Israelite money-lender, from whom Wilfrid obtained the loan of a couple of hundred pounds on the terms previously arranged for him by Cranston and O'Halloran.

In the course of the day Wilfrid penned a letter to his wife Rosalind, acquainting her with his encounter with a particular individual the night before the last one; and having despatched the epistle to the post, he gave way to joyous reflections in respect to that retrieval of his fortunes which he now considered to be certain. But, as he thus meditated, a suspicion stole into his mind—a suspicion which had not occurred to him before in the hurry and excitement of the previous two or three hours' transaction with Cranston and O'Halloran, and also with the Jew. Until this day he had merely regarded the two first-mentioned worthies as a couple of broken-down spendthrifts, living upon their wits by hanging on at gaming-houses and taverns, and sponging upon those who were their friends in better days: but he was hitherto unable to bring his mind to the opinion that they were so deeply imbued with villany as to play the part of desperadoes and become midnight robbers in the street. Thus we have seen that when a suspicion to this effect did first flash through his brain after the outrage perpetrated, or rather attempted against himself,—he had hastily banished the idea as too preposterous to be entertained. But now that he had acquired a deeper reading into the characters of these two men, this suspicion flashed back again to his mind, to settle down into fullest confirmation there. Yes—there could be no doubt of it: Cranston and O'Halloran were the assailants of Hamer—the assistants likewise of himself: and he was now leagued with these midnight desperadoes! Deeply depraved though Wilfrid already was, he nevertheless recoiled from the idea of such a hideous intimacy—such a criminal companionship; but his sensations of mingled loathing and horror quickly wore off—for he had already become too deeply implicated in their designs and nefarious schemes to effect a retreat. Moreover, his position was too desperate to allow such a retrograde course on the part of one who had neither moral courage nor rectitude of principle sufficient to sustain himself in the endeavour. Therefore the die was cast; and Wilfrid Middleton was determined to avail himself of the iniquitous means of retrieving his losses, which those villains had placed within his reach.

Normanton Manor was situated in the neighbourhood of Richmond: it was a modern edifice, of a chaste and beautiful architecture, built in the midst of well laid-out pleasure-grounds, and having a little domain of some few hundred acres attached to it. A streamlet—a tributary of the Thames—meandered through these grounds,—affording means for boating recreation, as well as occupation for the angler who might obtain permission from the noble proprietor to cast his line in those waters which were teeming with the finest specimens of trout. Lord Normanton has already been described to the reader as a man of about forty: and we may now add that he was unmarried. His mansion was furnished in the most sumptuous style; and his wealth enabled him to entertain the numerous friends and acquaintances who were but too glad to banquet at a table on which the most delicate dainties and the choicest wines were profusely served.

It was about six o'clock in the evening when Wilfrid Middleton, apparelled with great elegance, alighted from a hackney-coach at the front entrance of Normanton Manor. He was conducted into a splendidly-furnished as well as brilliantly-lighted drawing room, where he was welcomed by the noble host, and where he found about a dozen other male guests already assembled. To several of these he was previously known; and to those who were strangers he was forthwith introduced. These little ceremonies eing accomplished, Wilfrid availed himself of an opportunity to place a sealed packet in Normanton's hand,—saying, "In acquitting myself of my obligation to your lordship, I return my sincerest thanks for the readiness with which you saved me the trouble of a visit to my lodgings last night to procure fresh supplies from my strong-box."

"It was too trifling an affair to be worth thanking me for," said the Earl, as with his characteristic imperturbability he dropped the packet containing the bank-notes into his coat-pocket. "I remember I am to give you your revenge whenever you think fit," he added, with as much of a smile as ever he suffered to appear upon a countenance where a kind of pensive gravity mingled with an air of dissipation.

"Is the party complete?" inquired Middleton, carelessly glancing towards the company from the corner of the room where this little discourse took place.

"Yes—I think so," responded the Earl, as his looks slowly wandered over the guests who were conversing in small knots in different parts of the saloon. "Ah! now I bethink me, there is one yet to arrive—a young gentleman who was the other day recommended to my notice—— But here doubtless he is!"

The door was thrown open at the instant the Earl was thus speaking: and the gorgeously-liveried footman announced in a loud voice, "Mr. Pelham!"

The Earl advanced, with an air of well-bred courtesy, though dignified and sedate as was his wont, to receive the new-comer: but Wilfrid, on catching the first glimpse of that new-comer's countenance, remained

rooted to the spot—transfixed with an indescribable degree of astonishment.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

FRANCIS PELHAM.

Mr. Pelham was quite a young man—well-looking, but by no means handsome, and with nothing marked nor distinguishing in his appearance. He was plainly but very neatly dressed,—his toilet indicating a total absence of all pretension. And his simplicity of taste was likewise noticeable in his manner, which was inobstrusive even to diffidence: at the same time there was nothing awkward nor embarrassed in it—much less reserved or morose. To two or three of the guests he was already slightly known and on being presented to the others, he bowed with a sufficient degree of courtesy to indicate that he felt he was no intruder there, but at the same time that he was unwilling to thrust himself forward on an immediate footing of equality. In a word his was just such a manner that was calculated to impress the company with the idea that as he was a young man entering upon life, he did not pretend to its most refined experiences—but that he was quite content to remain as one of the humblest items of the assemblage amongst which he found himself.

Wilfrid, as we have said, was smitten with amazement on beholding this individual, who was indeed the same that had rescued him from Ned Cranston and Captain O'Halloran the night but one previously. Middleton however quickly recovered his self-possession; and almost as speedily too was his mind made up how to act. The Earl of Normanton having introduced Mr. Pelham to all the others of the company with whom he was previously unacquainted, turned to Wilfrid, saying, "Allow me, Middleton, to make you known to my friend:"—and he again mentioned the name.

"Indeed," cried Wilfrid, "Mr. Pelham is already known to me; and I am glad of this opportunity to renew my grateful thanks for the assistance he rendered me the other night."

"Ah!" said the Earl, "was it Mr. Pelham who succoured you in your encounter with those two unknown desperadoes?"

"The same," responded Wilfrid:—and he proffered his hand to Mr. Pelham.

This gentleman did not however, take it. Perhaps he did not observe the movement: perhaps it was his purpose to be slow in forming intimacies: or, perhaps he had other reasons of his own:—but whatever the real truth might be, certain it was that the contented himself by bowing and simply observing, "The little service which accident enabled me to render Mr. Middleton the night before last, is not worth half so many words as those which have been wasted upon it."

Wilfrid bit his lip for an instant, and his cheeks flushed with a momentary indignation, as he found himself placed in the most awkward and humiliating of all positions: namely, that of having his proffered hand unnoticed or else intentionally rejected. But stifling his feelings as well as he was able, he said, "Indeed,

Mr. Pelham considerably underrates the service he rendered me—through which perhaps I owe him my life: at all events he saved me from being plundered of a very considerable sum of money."

At this instant a footman entered to announce that dinner was served; and thus the little scene which we have just described was put an end to. But it happened that Wilfrid found himself seated at the banqueting-board next to Mr. Pelham, towards whom his manner continued to be most courteous and polite. The object of this studied attention conducted himself as if totally unaware of it: that is to say, he merely observed a becoming courtesy towards Wilfrid, dut did not reciprocate his advances towards a greater degree of intimacy. Middleton watched him without appearing to do so, and perceived that he was completely proficient in all the amenities and proprieties of the dinner-table—that he spoke but seldom—yet that when he did his remarks were characterized by good sense, although they were delivered inobtrusively and diffidently, but not with any painful constraint. Wilfrid wondered: and three or four times he found himself marvelling whether there could be any possible mistake, and whether Mr. Pelham was veritably and truly the individual for whom he took him?

"Yes—it must be," thought Wilfrid within himself: "or else wherefore did he so strangely reveal his countenance to me the night before last, and then disappear so abruptly the moment afterwards, as if anxious to avoid further discourse? But this changed—what means it? how came it about? No matter! Suffice it for me that it is so; and I must keep a seal upon my own lips in respect to what I know concerning him, lest he should be enabled to make unpleasant revelations in respect to myself."

Such was the tenor of Wilfrid's thoughts: but he could not prevent himself from experiencing a certain vague uneasiness at the young man's presence. To a guilty conscience there is always something fraught with suspicion or apprehension at any occurrence that happens suddenly or unexpectedly; and though Middleton could not precisely specify to himself what his immediate misgivings were—yet still, as we have seen, he considered in expedient to maintain the most courteous demeanour towards Mr. Pelham, and thus to convey through the medium of his manner, that sort of tacit assurance which if expressed in words, would have been something to the following effect:—I can tell a secret about you; but I will keep it, on the understanding that you say nothing of what you *may* possibly be enabled to reveal in respect to myself."

On the other hand, there was nothing in Pelham's manner to show that he reciprocated this feeling, or that he tacitly fell into the understanding. Indeed there was no particular meaning in Pelham's manner at all: it was simply that of an ordinary but distant courtesy. Perhaps it was that he cared nothing at all for the secret which Wilfrid had it in his power to reveal concerning him: or perhaps he was calmly self-possessed in the consciousness that Middleton would not dare reveal that secret through fear of provoking

counter-revelations, in which kind of warfare Wilfrid would come infinitely the worse off.

The banquet progressed; and when the dessert was placed upon the table, the wine began to circulate with considerable freedom in respect to the great majority of those present. The Earl of Normanton drank deeply—but appeared as if he could stand all that he thus partook of. He conversed without excitement; indeed, he never displayed a strength of feeling on any particular point, but was wont to address himself with an air of equal impassiveness to a carouse or to a long night of play. There was always mingled with his seriousness a certain settled pensiveness, as if at some period of his life he had sustained a more than ordinary sorrow, the sense of which had entertwined itself so intricately amongst the fibres of his heart that there it must remain, but so far latent as never to ruffle the surface of his countenance with any sudden or fitful emotion. There was indeed some tale vaguely and whisperingly afloat, of a love disappointment sustained in his earlier years, long before he had inherited the title and estates of Normanton: but no one whoever echoed that whisper seemed to be enabled to throw any additional light upon the particulars, nor even to speak as to the certainty of its truth.

There were two persons at the sumptuously-covered board who maintained considerable abstemiousness in respect to the wine: these were Francis Pelham and Wilfrid Middleton. The former was moderate from habit—the latter moderate only for the present occasion, and *this* through calculation; he wished to keep his head clear for the part he had presently to play in respect to the loaded dice. It was the habit in those times for gentlemen to sit very long over their wine: and at bachelors' parties there was seldom any removal to the drawing-room to partake of tea or coffee. Nevertheless the master of the house generally announced at some late hour that such lighter refreshment would be provided for those who fancied it; and on this occasion there were two or three gentlemen who did express a wish to retire awhile to the drawing-room—an opportunity of which Francis Pelham availed himself to get away from a board that was much too convivial for his tastes and habits. Wilfrid however remained, in order to be ready for the moment when the Earl of Normanton should propose play: and when the removal was made by the three or four seceders, Wilfrid shifted his quarters to a chair which had been left vacant on the Earl's left hand.

"Your lordship's youngest guest," said Middleton, with a careless air, "is a very unassuming nice young man."

"I think so," responded the Earl: "he has as yet seen little of life, and is somewhat shy and diffident—— But then, he is very young!"

"And where did your lordship happen to pick him up?" inquired Middleton.

"He was introduced to me some few weeks back at General Ruthven's table," answered the Earl of Normanton; "and Ruthven, you know,

is a very particular friend of mine. He bespoke on Pelham's part any civilities which I might be enabled to show him; and therefore I availed myself of this opportunity to invite him to dinner."

"Is he a connexion of the General's?" asked Wilfrid, who knew perfectly well that he was not, but merely put the question in order to elicit farther information respecting one whom, as the reader has seen, he was astonished to find in the palatial mansion of aristocracy.

"No—not at all," answered Normanton. "I will tell you how the General formed his acquaintance, and how he came to take a liking to him. It was some months back that the General was passing at night in his carriage across Hounslow Heath, when the equipage was stopped by a couple of masked highwaymen. The postillion was knocked off his horse, and lay senseless in the road—the General's valet was a craven who surrendered up his pistols at the first demand, instead of making use of them—Ruthven's own weapons were ineffectually fired—and therefore he found himself completely at the mercy of his two assailants. They dragged him out of his carriage, which one of the scoundrels proceeded to ransack, while the other kept guard over the prostrate General and the craven valet. But all of a sudden a horseman galloped up to the spot; and as the quick ears of the robbers had made them aware that it was but *one* horseman, they did not betake themselves to their own steeds and therewith to flight. On the contrary, they remained boldly on the spot; and the instant the horseman approached, a couple of pistols were discharged at him, one following the other in the twinkling of an eye. His escape from injury—indeed from death—appears to have been almost miraculous: but his bravery and presence of mind were as great as that escape on his part was astonishing. Dashing up to the spot, he struck down one of the highwaymen with his riding-whip; and springing from his steed, at once grappled the other, who had desisted from ransacking the chaise. The victory on the stranger's part was complete: the General sprang up—the valet recovered courage—and both the highwaymen were secured. A word will dispose of this portion of the history: they were conveyed in the carriage to Hounslow, where they were lodged in the cage—but from that cage they escaped ere morning. As for the General's gallant deliverer, he was none other than francis Pelham; and you cannot therefore wonder if Ruthven should have conceived so great a liking for him. By the bye," added Normanton, "there is some degree of similitude between the circumstances which threw Pelham in the way of Ruthven and those which first rendered you acquainted with him.

"Yes," observed Wilfrid: "he seems destined to figure in incidents of this sort. I suppose he belongs to a good family?"

"I do not happen to have heard," answered Normanton: "but I take it that it must be so, as he seems tolerably well off—and though so young,

enjoys an independence of his own without any profession as the source of his means."

"Ruthven has a beautiful daughter," said Wilfrid, affecting a careless smile; "and perhaps she will become Mrs. Pelham?"

"It will be but natural under the circumstances," rejoined the Earl: "for General Ruthven is evidently much attached to his gallant young deliverer. But now that I bethink me, I promised you your revenge for last night's proceedings——"

"Ah!" said Wilfrid, as if quite indifferent on the point, "I remember that something of the sort was spoken of: but not bearing it in mind when I left home, I did not provide myself with more than just what my purse happened to contain at the time."

"That is of no consequence," responded the Earl of Normanton: "my word is pledged—we will play if you wish it—and we can easily keep an account on a slip of paper: so that if fortune still continues adverse to you," he added, with as much of a smile as ever appeared upon his features, "you can remit me your cheque to-morrow."

The bell was rang; and the domestic who answered the summons was ordered to bring in cards and dice. The command was promptly obeyed; and the implements of gambling were placed upon the dessert-table—it being a common thing in those times for gentlemen to remain sitting over their wine while they indulged in play at the same time. Cards were taken possession of by some—dice by others; and thus all round that table play of one kind or the other was speedilyin progress. Wilfrid and the Earl played with dice and the *memoranda* entered upon the paper soon exhibited increasing losses on the part of Wilfrid Middleton. He had the loaded dice in his waistcoat-pocket, ready for substitution at the first opportunity; and this was not long in presenting itself. Francis Pelham entered the room to bid his noble host "good night" as he was about to take his departure Normanton, though dissipated and addicted to gaming, was not, however, an unprincipled man at bottom; and he never sought to infect young persons with whatsoever there was of evil in his own example. He did not therefore press Francis Pelham to rejoin the party in the dining-room, nor to remain any longer: but as he rose from the table to shake him by the hand, he said with a bland courtesy, and with much sincerity likewise "Now that you have once found your way hither, Mr. Pelham, I hope that you will often cross my threshold; and the invitation is the same with regard to my town-residence."

Pelham made a suitable response,—thanking his lordship for his kindness; and bowing generally to the rest of the company, he retreated towards the door. The Earl moved to the bell to ring it, that the domestics might be in attendance to afford Mr. Pelham egress from the mansion: the remainder of the company, having acknowledged the departing guest's bow, reverted their looks towards their respective games;—and this was Wilfrid's opportunity A glance showed him that it was so; and snatching up the legitimate dice from the table, he substituted the

loaded ones in the twinking of an eye. But just at that very instant Francis Pelham turned his face towards the room as he opened the door to pass out; and Wilfrid felt that the blood rushed with such force to his countenance that it appeared to leave every other part of his body. The next moment, however, the door closed behind Francis Pelham; and with a feeling of infinite relief, Wilfrid thought within himself, "He did not notice it!"

Still he could not in that same moment fling off his confusion: but he sought to veil it, as the Earl returned towards his seat, by filling himself a bumper of wine; then as he slowly quaffed it he looked at Normanton to assure himself that there was no suspicion in this quarter. Nor was there. Calm and collected as usual, the Earl resumed his seat; and the play was continued. Now the tide of fortune—if fortune it could be called under such circumstances—changed abruptly: the sum of Middleton's losses rapidly diminished—and in a short time it was succeeded by a register of successive gains. The Earl played on without a comment on his change of what he conceived to be luck; but Wilfrid was sufficiently wily to let his noble opponent win a few occasional stakes—sometimes three or four consecutively—so as to give the game that natural capricious air which belongs to chance proceedings. Until a late hour in the night—or rather an early one in the morning, was the game continued; and when Wilfrid had won nearly three thousand guineas, he thought it would be more prudent to desist,

although the Earl would have gone on for as many hours longer.

Another opportunity enabled Wilfrid to substitute the legitimate dice for the loaded ones: the party broke up; and on reaching his lodgings in London at about four o' clock in the morning, Middleton literally leapt with delight at the result of that rascality for his initiation in which he was indebted to Ned Cranston and Captain O' Halloran.

CHAPTER XXIX.

GENERAL RUTHVEN

In a handsomely furnished room, in a West End mansion, and elderly gentleman and a young lady were seated. The former was bordering upon his sixtieth year; but his florid complexion, his well-preserved teeth, the undimmed lustre of his eye, and the erect carriage of his tall portly form, showed that time sat with comparative lightness upon him, and that he enjoyed the vigour of an excellent constitution. There was an honest frankness in his demeanor—an unmistakable openness in his look, which denoted the generous heart, as well as the pround consciousness of an integrity of character that could not be impeached. Although dressed in plain clothes, he had a military air: and an observer with any degree of acuteness could not fail to have recognised in this personage the manly dignity of one who had been accustomed to wield authority. In a word, it is General Ruthven whom we are now introducing to our readers.

The young lady whom we have represented as his companion, was

his daughter—an only child. She was not more than seventeen years of age; and if not faultlessly beautiful, at least exceedingly interesting, not merely in his personal appearance but likewise in her manners. Her features were not perhaps of classic regularity; but yet it could only be the veriest hypercriticism that would descend into cavilling details. She had light brown hair, showering in countless ringlets upon her shoulders: and the long flexible neck bore the head in a manner which could not fail to remind the beholder of the graceful elegance with which the lotus sustains its flowers when the stalk is undulating with the rippling motion of the wave. Her eyes were of a clear azure, reflecting the hue as well as the innocence of heaven; and they were fringed with lashes a shade or two darker than her hair. Her complexion was very fair; a few freckles—scarcely perceptible—appeared upon the forehead, but without marring its polished beauty. The nose was not quite straight, the inflection being slightly downward—a configuration which may be better conveyed by the French term *retrousse*, and which gave an air of girlish simplicity to that interesting countenance. The lips were well-formed; and when parting in smiles, displayed a beautiful set of teeth. The clim was softly rounded, and slightly dimpled in the middle. She was not tall; and her figure was of sylphid slenderness, yet with the contours of girlhood expanding into womanhood—so that the symmetry, although on a slight and airy scale, displayed the flowing outlines that gave promise of expansion into a fuller and richer beauty in the course of a few years.

Such was Josephine Ruthven, the only child and heiress of the General, whowas a man of considerable wealth. She had lost her mother exactly two years previous to the date of which we are writing; and this calamity being experienced at an age when it could only be too deeply felt and appreciated, had impressed the bereaved daughter's countenance with a soft pensiveness, which, becoming almost habitual there, rendered her only the more touchingly interesting. She had been well-educated, and was elegantly accomplished: but so inobtrusive and diffident was she in her manners and conduct, that it required a somewhat lengthy acquaintance to discover all the graces of her cutivated mind. And this mind, too, was characterized by the most artless simplicity: for the snow on the loftiest Alpine peak was not purer than the thoughts of Josephine. At the same time it must not be imagined from this similitude that there was an unnatural coldness in her disposition: on the contrary, it was susceptible of the warmest feelings and of the most generous enthusiasm when circumstances transpired to put her amiable qualities to the best. If a tale of woe reached her ears, her grief in listening to it could only be equalled by her joy in forwarding or bearing succour to the afflicted: and often when, leaning on her father's arm, she was walking through the streets of the multitudinous metropolis, it was to visit some poor family whose sufferings or distresses had come to her knowledge.

Some months had elapsed since General and Miss Ruthven first formed the acquaintance of Francis Pelham. As we have already said, there was nothing striking nor distinguished in the personal appearance of that young gentleman: but it was impossible to be long acquainted with him without discovering the many good traits which belonged to his character. It was the goodness rather than the personal appearance of an individual which was calculated to make an impression upon Josephine Ruthven—to win her esteem and to secure her friendship. But towards Francis Pelham she had from the very first experienced another feeling; namely, that of gratitude—inasmuch as she regarded him as the chivalrous deliverer of her father from the outrageous hands of a couple of desperadoes. Gratitude, esteem, and friendship go far, in elementary commingling to constitute that softer and more tender sentiment which could not fail to take a firm root in the generous, the pure, and immaculate heart of such a being as Josephine Ruthven. And therefore she loved Francis Pelham: but as yet, at the time when we introduce her to our readers she scarcely comprehended the feeling—or at all events had not seriously admitted it to herself. It is thus that love takes its birth in the chaste soul of a young virgin too little acquainted with the world and too little experienced in human passions to understand its presence at the outset: it is the soft and gradual yielding up of the heart to a sweet but unknown influence—in the same way that on a still calm autumn evening, the mind unconsciously abandons itself to the gently stealing and undefinable influence of twilight.

It was in the afternoon of the day following that on which the party was given at Normanton Manor, that we find General Ruthven and his daughter seated together in the drawing-room at their handsome mansion in one of the best quarters of London. The General had a newspaper in his hand: Josephine was engaged with embroidery-work. There had reigned a long silence betwenn them: for the young lady was more than usually pensive—and the eyes of her parent often wandered abstractedly away from the columns of the journal, or remained resting upon them as if looking on vacancy. The two years of mourning for the depated wife and mother had expired on the previous day; and this was the first time since their sad bereavement that they had appeared in their ordinary apparel. Josephine was thinking of the loss she had sustained—so that ever and anon a tear dropped upon her embroidery: while the veteran found similar reflections continuously stealing into his own mind. Yet both, with an affectionate regard for each other, forbore from any allusion which would perhaps elicit an outburst of grief: and yet they could not do such violence to their feelings as to start other topics or assume an air of gaiety.

At length the newspapers gliding from the General's hand, fell upon the carpet—himself unconscious of the circumstance; and as he gazed with tenderness upon his daughter, he mentally repeated certain words of counsel and entreaty which hi

wife had addressed to him during the last hour of her existence.

"Do not, my beloved husband," she had said, "seek only for a brilliant alliance for our darling Josephine: but consider the good qualities rather than the worldly advantages of him who may seek her as a wife. Above all things, do not thwart her heart's inclinations when they flow in a channel of which you can approve: for I am confident that she will not waste the treasure of her affections upon an unworthy individual."

Need we say that General Ruthven had faithfully promised his dying wife to follow her counsel? or need we add that this counsel was entirely consistent with his own feelings? And now he was revolving in his mind the words that conveyed that advice; and as he gazed tenderly upon his daughter, a thought began gradually to steal into his imagination. It had not long taken inception there, where it assumed a consistency which engendered a certain feeling of satisfaction and joy—a joy that was however tranquil and profound: for it appeared as if the realization of that idea would dissipate any anxieties which as a father he naturally experienced on behalf of the future welfare of his daughter. He had no near relatives amongst whom she might find a home if anything suddenly happened to himself; and though hale and hearty, with the sense of great constitutional vigour, General Ruthven never forgot that as a mortal he was liable to accident and that his breath was dependent upon the Almighty who gave it. He therefore felt that it would indeed be a relief from a certain source of anxiety if he knew that his beloved daughter could become engaged to one who, so far as present appearances went, seemed in every way qualified to make her a good husband, in the sense that would fulfil the counsel of his deceased wife.

The General looked at his watch, and saw that it was about the hour when Francis Pelham was accustomed to call. After a few minutes' additional reflection, the General issued from the room, and descending to the entrance hall, he said to a domestic there, "When Mr. Pelham comes, show him into my own parlour."

Thither the General proceeded; and continued his meditations for a quarter of an hour longer—at the expiration of which Mr. Pelham was announced. The veteran soldier had conceived such an affection for his young deliverer, that he was wont to address him in terms of familiar endearment; and grasping him warmly by the hand, he said, "Welcome, my dear boy—you know that you are always welcome here! Sit down and tell me how you were pleased with your evening's entertainment at Normanton Manor?"

"You know, my kind friend," answered Pelham; "that my whole and sole object in mingling amongst such scenes is to see life in its various phases——and also—I do not blush to confess it—to acquire artificially those advantages of manner and bearing which were not mine naturally."

"I know Francis," responded the General, "that you have often and often told me this much; and it was to further your views that I introduced

you to the Earl of Normanton. To his late father was I indebted for many kindnesses; and to the son of that deceased nobleman is my greateful friendship accordingly extended. But as you are aware, there is little similitude between the pursuits of the present Earl and mine own; our tastes and our ways are diffe-rent. His honour, as the world goes, is unimpeachable: but, on the other hand, there is no denying that his morals might be more correct. To such a man, therefore, I should not have introduced you with the idea that you would make him your friend, nor even a very frequent companion. I knew, however, that at his table you would meet a variety of characters which it would be as well to study, and glean some of those experiences which are requisite for the completion of what may be termed a polite education. At the same time, I was equally aware that the Earl of Normanton would not seek to lead you astray, and that you yourself were beyond the reach of pernicious temptation. I am no straight-laced person: I like to see young men go into society and mingle with the world;—indeed, I will admit that in order to keep themselves on the right side of the line which seperates rational pleasure from reprehensible dissipation, they must look upon all that lies beyond the boundary."

"Adopting the view which you have just taken of the subject," observed Pelham, "I do not hesitate to declare that I was sufficienty well pleased with my evening's entertainment at Normanton Manor. The Earl treated me with a kind courtesy; and I was enabled to study the characters of the noblemen and gentleman whom I met at his table."

"Let me assure you my dear boy," said the General, "that you are profiting amazingly by your intercourse with what is termed good society."

"Thanks to you, my kind friend," responded Pelham, "I have been presented to several excellent families; and I *do* feel that I am gaining some of those advantages for which I sought."

"Remember that I speak to you, Francis," resumed the General, "as if I were addressing my own son. I am incapable of flattery; and as a friend I would rather tell you of any faults than seek to maintain you in ignorance of them. Therefore you may judge with what sincerity I give you the assurance that you are acquiring, with singular rapidity and facility, those proprieties of manner and those amenities of polite society in which, as you frankly confessed to me at the outset of our acquaintance, you knew yourself to be deficient. But without the slightest feeling of undue curiosity—and in the spirit of sincerest friendship—may I not hope to be some day admitted to your entire confidence?"

"I feel—I know," replied Pelham, in a low voice, and with a grave expression of countenance, "that I ought to tell you everything: but—but—I dare not! There is an injunction—received from the lips of a benefactor—which leaves me no discretion, and deprives me in a particular sense of the mastery over my own actions. I have told you, my kind friend, that I have not always

been in the sphere in which I now find myself—that I was not always in the enjoyment of wealth——for what I possess *is* indeed wealth to me——"

"Yes, Fancis—you told me all *that*—and with the utmost candour," interrupted the General. "I will question you no more. Pray forgive me, my dear boy, if I sought for a moment to penetrate more deeply into your past history than you had already suffered me to read it. I have the fullest confidence in you— I am sure that in respect to whatsoever you have told me, everything is consistent with truth—you possess my friendship—you have endeared yourself to me——"

At this moment the door was thrown open; and the Earl of Normanton was announced. Francis Pelham hastily dashed away the tears which gratefulest emotions had brought into his eyes; and the veteran soldier, who had likewise been much moved, recovered his own self-possession in an instant. Lord Normanton, however, saw that his presence had interrupted a somewhat serious discourse; and he began to apologize,—when the General, taking his hand, hastened to assure him that no such apology was necessary. The Earl shook hands with Pelham; and then glided with well-bred ease into a conversation on the passing topics of the day.

"By the bye, Mr. Pelham," he presently observed, "I did not press you to remain last night, inasmuch as I was bound to give Mr. Middleton his revenge at play—and as you do not play yourself——"

"I can assure you, my dear lord," exclaimed the General, "that on behalf of my young friend I am grateful for your kind consideration on the point. In my earlier days—before I married, and when roughing it in the camp—I myself played: but it is a pursuit that I have long renounced."

"It is a pastime as well as another," said the Earl: "but though I practise it, I do not recommend it. Indeed, I am seldom fortunate; and the pleasure is a costly one. By the bye, last night I was more than usually unlucky, Up to a certain point. Fortune appeared to be with me: but all of a sudden she changed. And now that I recollect," added the Earl, "it was immediately after you left, Mr. Pelham, that the tide of illuck set in strong against me. Middleton, you may remember, was my opponent——"

"Ah, Middleton!" ejaculated the General: "he has been a sad wild fellow, from all I have heard—though I know but little of him personally. And pray, my dear Earl, what might have been the extent of your losses?"

"Oh, a matter of three thousand guineas or so," answered Normanton in a careless manner.

"Three thousand guineas!" ejaculated Pelham. "Is it possible——"

And then he suddenly stopped short, as a strange suspicion all in a mement took birth within him.

"I see," said the Earl, with that partial smile which now and then relaxed the pensive rigidity of his features "that I must not astonish you, Mr. Pelham, with the length to

which this small vice of mine runs: or else I shall suffer in your esteem—which I should be unwilling to do. Let us change the discourse."

With these words, his lordship skilfully and easily started a new topic: but at the expiration of a few minutes Francis Pelham rose to take his leave on some pretext: and on issuing forth from General Ruthven's mansion, he at once bent his way to Wilfrid Middleton's lodgings, the address of which he had happened to hear, mentioned on the preceding evening.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE LOADED DICE.

WILFRID MIDDLETON was seated in his apartment, awaiting the arrival of Ned Cranston and Captain O'Halloran, in order to hand over unto these worthies that proportion of the plunder which according to previous agreement was to pass into their pockets. In a certain sense he was exultingly joyous; for he had now ample funds in his possession, and his position was therefore immensely altered from what it was on the previous day. But yet there was a vague feeling of uneasiness about him: for unprincipled and unscrupulous though he were, it was nevertheless impossible for any man to take such a new step in the pathway of turpitude and wrong-doing without experiencing a certain sensation of discomfort lest by any accident the secret of his iniquity should transpire to the knowledge of the personage who had suffered by it. Wilfrid could not help thinking of the circumstance of Francis Pelham turning so unexpectedly at the door when about to issue from the dining-room at Normanton Manor; and though he endeavoured to persuade himself that Pelham had in reality seen nothing, yet he could not altogether banish an apprehension that it might have been otherwise. We have said that Wilfrid by no means liked that young gentleman's presence at the Manor; his guilty conscience made him feel, for a variety of reasons, as if Pelham were an individual who was crossing his path. There was a profound mystery enveloping that gentleman, and which Wilfrid himself could not penetrate. He knew this much of Pelham—that he had been in a very inferior condition to that in which he now appeared; but he was utterly at a loss to comprehend how the young man could have obtained the means to assume the station in which he was thus figuring. This very mystery naturally tended to render Pelham an object of additional apprehension to Wilfrid Middleton: for the guilty conscience is always rendered the most uneasy in proportion as it is the less able to comprehend the circumstances, the views, and designs of whosoever becomes the object of its misgiving.

From all that we have just said, the reader may with facility understand how Wilfrid Middleton experienced a certain degree of uneasiness, notwithstanding that he was in the possession of ample funds and that he had within his reach the iniquitous means of obtaining more. His mind could not help dwelling upon that individual who had seemed suddenly to rise up in order to cross his path—though he scarcely knew how or

wherefore. But at length starting from a reverie which was growing more and more unpleasant, Wilfrid laughed aloud,—exclaiming, "After all, what have I to apprenend? and can I not defy him? Away with those idle fears—these meaningless apprehensions!"

As he thus spoke, he thrust his hands exultingly into his pockets, which were filled with gold and bank-notes; and one of those hands encountered the loaded dice amidst the quantity of coin which it clutched and chinked. He wanted some means of diverting his mind from disagreeable thoughts until Ned Cranston and O'Halloran should make their appearance: he accordingly drew forth the dice—took a box from the mantel piece—and began to throw them. With all the gloating inveteracy of a gambler, he soon became so absorbed it his employment that he did not hear footsteps ascending the stairs; and it may therefore easily be supposed how he started when the servant of the house, abruptly throwing open the door, announced Mr. Pelham.

A glacial chill shot through Wilfrid's heart—and his first impulse was to snatch up the dice: but ere he thus fatally committed himself, his complete self-possession returned,—a second thought making him aware that such an action would be the very height of folly, inasmuch as it would at once originate a suspicion if none existed, or most assuredly confirm it if it were already entertained. Wilfrid accordingly suffered the dice to lie where he had just thrown them out of the box; and in pursuance of that policy which had prompted him to treat Pelham in a conciliatory manner, he rose from his seat, exclaiming, "though most unexpected, yet most welcome!"

He did not however proffer his hand: for he still inwardly smarted under the sense of its rejection on the previous evening; and despite that hastily assumed frankness of manner, all his misgivings returned in respect to an individual who appeared to have been raised up to cross his path. Nor was his apprehension mitigated when he perceived that the young gentleman's countenance wore an aspect of grave yet mournful serenity.

Cold and distant indeed was the salutation—limited to a slight but formal inclining of the head—with which Pelham acknowledged the seemingly cordial welcome that Middleton bestowed on him. Wilfrid bit his lip for an instant; but hastened to request his visitor to be seated. Pelham accordingly took a chair—but at once drew it in such a way that as he sat down, he was close to that very part of the table where the dice had been thrown out of the box. A strange terror seized upon the conscience-stricken Wilfrid: but there was no alternative for him beyond taking another seat at a little distance.

"It is very kind of you to call," said Middleton, "and thus renew an old acquaintance. Of course I am happy to see you. I must congratulate you on your change of position——"

"Mr. Middleton," interrupted Pelham, in a cold voice, "let me at once disabuse you of the interpretation which you are putting upon my presence here. I call upon a matter of

business—a very serious business—and for no other motive."

"A serious business?" echoed Middleton; and for an instant he gasped and turned pale: but quickly recovering his effrontery, he said, "I am really at a loss to conceive what serious business——"

"Mr. Middleton," again interrupted Pelham, "you are at *no* loss to comprehend my purpose: nor am I at any loss to discern by your looks and manner that you do comprehend it."

"Really, Mr. Pelham—this is speaking in a strain——"

"I do not wish to beat about the bush, nor prolong my visit here. Therefore, to come to the point at once"—and here Pelham assumed an almost stern air of authority—"you last night defrauded the Earl of Normanton of three thousand guineas."

"Mr. Pelham!" ejaculated Middleton, starting up with an assumed indignation, but with a most real terror: this charge, sir——"

"Is true!" responded Francis firmly: and he also rose from his seat.

"It is false, sir—false as hell!" rejoined Middleton: and then he gasped for breath—he was pale as a sheet—his lips quivered—and a strong nervous trembling pervaded his entire form.

"I repeat that it is true," said Pelham, perfectly cool and undaunted: "your demeanour, sir, betrays you."

"You lie!—you lie most foully!" vociferated Middleton; and with an irresistible impulse derived from the agony of terror, he darted forth his hand to snatch the loaded dice.

"No!—the proofs must be in my keeping," said Pelham: and at the same instant the dice were in his own hand.

"By heaven you shall not rob me thus!" exclaimed Middleton: and with a sort of subdued savage howl, like that of a wild beast, he clutched Pelham's wrist with one hand, and strove to regain possession of the dice with the other.

A person who is cool and collected has always the physical advantage as well as the moral one over an antagonist who has lost his temper, even though the former may not be altogether the stronger. This truth was illustrated in the present instance: for Pelham with no great difficulty disengaged himself from Wilfrid's clutch; and by the sudden force of the movement, sent his opponent staggering backward, although no actual blow was struck. The next instant the dice were consigned to Pelham's waistcoat-pocket—his arms were folded across his breast—and his look, though without the slightest tincture of boastful triumph, was nevertheless expressive of a resolute determination to resist any further attempt to take those dice from him. For an instant Wilfrid's impulse was to spring violently upon Francis and endeavour to regain possession of the damning proofs of his iniquity: but a second thought told him that the disturbance produced by a struggle would only bring up the people of the house—so that serious results, involving the fullest exposure, might ensue. In a condition of mind scarcely to be

envied by a person about to be hanged, Wilfrid Middleton sank back in his seat—gasping, panting, quivering, and deadly pale.

"Now, understand me at once, Mr. Middleton," said Francis Pelham. "I do not wish to ruin you completely: for the sake of the family with which you are connected I would fain spare you that crowning degradation."

These words carried a certain amount of relief to Wilfrid's heart: but he said nothing: he would not admit—at least not for the present—that he was really guilty of the fraud imputed to him.

"Tell me, in one word," continued Francis, "whether you have disposed of the sum which you received last night from the Earl of Normanton?"

"Before I answer any questions," replied Middleton, determined to proceed cautiously, "will you have the kindness to inform me what is the course you intend to adopt——I mean under the impression which you somehow or another entertain in respect to the proceedings of last night?"

"I have no objection to acquaint you," responded Pelham, "that my fixed resolve is to procure—nay, to enforce—the restitution of that sum of money of which you defrauded—I am compelled to use the expression—the Earl of Normanton last night. For the family reasons already glanced at, I am anxious to spare you as much as possible; and I have not therefore as yet breathed a word to his lordship to excite the suspicion that he was unfairly dealt with! But I beheld the substitution of one set of dice for another; and your own manner just now convinced me that these are the fraudulent dice which I have in my possession. For my own sake I must add that I know little of these things: but I have not been an sojourner in the metropolis without catching a whisper that such nefarious means are resorted to. I will even say more. Though certainly struck by the incident which I beheld last night, I could not conceive at the time that you had sunk so low as to adopt so base a proceeding. It was not until an hour back that the conviction—the painful conviction—struck me that it was so."

During this long speech, Wilfrid Middleton had leisure to regain much of his lost self-possession. He felt that he was in Pelham's power: but as he perceived that this individual was inclined to deal leniently with him, he hoped to gain advantages from the circumstance: and at all events he might shape his own conduct according to that which was to be pursued towards him.

"You say, Mr. Pelham," he observed, "that you mean to insist on the complete restitution of the sum that I gained last night. What if I indignantly deny the charge you have levelled against me?"

"In that case," was the young gentleman's calm and collected response, "you leave me no alternative but to seek Lord Normanton at once—tell him everything—place these dice in his hand—and leave him to the adoption of such criminal proceedings as he may think suitable."

Wilfrid bit his lip; and then said, "But if you are really so anxious to screen me from complete exposure

——and remember, I am speaking for argument's sake, and not for an instant admitting the truth of the charge itself——But if, I repeat, you are so desirous that a full exposure shall not ensue, by what means do you purpose that the restitution shall be made ?"

"I had deliberated upon this point before I came hither," answered Pelham. "Rest assured that I would have spared you exposure in every sense if I could : but there are no means of saving you from one act of humiliation. You must throw yourself on the Earl's mercy ——"

What ! " ejaculated Middleton : "confess——"

"Yes—confess to him that you played unfairly" rejoined Pelham : "but you will implore his secrecy—and as his lordship will take the restitution of the money as a proof of completest contrition, he will deal generously with you."

Wilfrid, rising from his seat, paced the apartment to and fro in a state of anguished agitation ; and at length, stopping short, he said in a low hoarse voice, "But this is absolute ruin, Mr. Pelham, to which you are driving me !"

"The ruin would be more complete," was the response, "if the Earl of Normanton caused you to be dragged as a felon before a magistrate. I indicate for your adoption that alternative which comprises the lesser evil of the two."

"Granting that his lordship will keep the matter secret," said the soul-tortured Wilfrid, "I shall be branded in his eyes——"

"Better be branded in the estimation of one individual," interrupted Pelham, "than in that of the whole world."

"He would never speak to me again !" urged Wilfrid, in an agony of despair.

"No—but he will be too generous," answered Pelham, "to tell others wherefore he passes you unrecognised in the street ; and it will be your own fault if you thrust yourself into the society which he frequents."

"Do you know, Mr. Pelham—do you comprehend," asked Wilfrid, well-nigh choked by his excruciating feelings, "that you are driving me into a course which will be utter destruction ? Think you that if the Earl should at any time behold me playing with another, he would not wispher a warning word in the ear of that other ?"

"No doubt of it," answered Pelham : "and to prevent you from playing in future was precisely one of my calculations in the adoption of the lenient course which I am taking. Mr. Middleton, I would save you if I can–I will redeem you so far as within my power your redemption lies !"—and now for the first time during this interview there was the tremulousness of emotion in Pelham's voice.

Wilfrid made no immediate answer but again began to pace the room with a feverish agitation. To surrender up the money which he had gained, was to beggar himself all in a moment ; and to confess his iniquity to the Earl of Normanton, was to shut himself out for the future from those gambling-houses which were frequented by the superior class. Besides, he had to settle with Ned Cranston and Captain O'Halloran; and they were by no means the likely

men to listen pleasantly or patiently to the tale that he had already handed back or else meant to restore the whole of his winnings to Lord Normanton. In a word, therefore, Wilfrid's position was even more desperate than it ever yet had been: but how could he possibly avoid bending in every respect to the dictates of Francis Pelham?

"You have spoken in a friendly way towards me," said Wilfrid, at length desisting from his agitated walk, and addressing his visitor in a manner of mingled cajolery and entreaty: "you surely cannot wish to push matters to extremes—"

"It is useless, Mr. Middleton, to argue the point anew," interrupted Pelham. "Were you my own brother, and branding disgrace the consequence, I would compel you to make restitution of that sum so iniquitously gained. Perhaps, sir, added the young gentleman," severely and almost sternly, "you have lost sight of the fact that if I permitted you to retain that sum—possessing as I now do the knowledge of how it was acquired—I should stand in the light of an accomplice."

"One word, Mr. Pelham!" said Wilfrid, determined as a last resource to adopt a menacing position, and at least abstain from yielding until every act and means of defence had failed. "I find you, sir, moving in the best society—one simple word from my lips would exclude you thence—"

"And that word, Mr. Middleton," responded Francis, coldly, "will *not* be spoken by your lips!"

"And what is to prevent me?" demanded Wilfrid, doggedly.

"The simple fact," rejoined Pelham "that if you were to say something which though, after all, would only be a source of comparatively trivial annoyance to me, I have it in my power to proclaim so much of your antecedents that you would be hooted from all society—the very lowest and the basest would hate, contemn, and despise you. And now, sir—knowing what I do of you—it may seem a matter of wonder that I should adopt any lenient measures at all, or that I should even express the slightest interest in your welfare. But think not for an instant that it is through fear of your lips giving utterance to that word to which you have alluded. No—I should scorn myself if I were actuated by such motives. I repeat that the influence which inspires me, is totally apart from such consideration; and I spare you—I would even serve you if I could, because you bear a name which is honourably borne by others, and which I would therefore prevent as much as possible from being dragged through the mire."

Wilfrid felt that on every point he was completely beaten and baffled by the young man whose demeanour was so calm and collected, and who appeared so conscious of the strength of his own position. From certain words which he had uttered, the wretched Middleton clutched at a hope which was to the effect that if he yielded to his dictation in respect to the restitution of the money, he might possibly be befriended by one who in a pecuniary sense appeared so fully able to befriend him. As this hope flashed to his mind, it engendered a thought; and this thought consti-

tuted an artifice well worthy the deep designing character of Wilfrid Middleton. He had the entire sum of three thousand guineas intact in his pocket; what if he were to pretend that he had already made away with a part, and thus endeavour at once to induce Francis Pelham to draw his purse-strings in his favour? He affected to pace the room once more in an agitated manner, though he was now in reality only conning the terms in which he should shape the language whereby his new artifice was to be carried out. Suddenly he stopped short, and turned to address Pelham: but he saw this individual's gaze fixed with such scrutiny upon him, that it seemed as if it penetrated down to the very depths of his soul, —thus reading all his thoughts. He could not immediately speak: he was staggered—and his guilty conscience made him feel all the predominating influence wielded by that young man, who came to dictate terms, and who appeared ready to foil every artifice, and beat him back from every position of defence which he might choose to take. The desperation of his circumstances, as well as his aptitude for craftiness, speedily however gave him back his self-possession; and in a voice of almost servile entreaty, he said, "Mr. Pelham, I would yield to the conditions which you impose—but I have not the sum which you desire me to restore to the Earl of Normanton."

"Mr. Middleton, you are telling me a falsehood," replied Francis, bending a sternly searching look upon him. "Do not for an instant flatter yourself that you deceive me by an artifice which is the result of a sudden thought. I was careful to inquire of the servant of the house whether you had been out this day, and whether you had as yet received any visitors. The answer was in the negative. You have therefore had no means of making away with any portion of that amount which you obtained from the Earl of Normanton."

It would be impossible to describe the expression of impotent rage and humiliating disappointment which passed over Wilfrid's countenance as the lie was thus thrown in his teeth, and as he found himself again baffled in the manœuvre which he attempted. There was nothing to do but to succumb without further resistance, and to fall back upon the hope that Francis Pelham would befriend him when restitution should be made to the Earl of Normanton."

"Your dictates shall be obeyed," he accordingly said: "but you will restore me those dice——"

"Heaven forbid that I should wish to retain them longer than is necessary!" exclaimed Pelham, in accents of loathing and abhorrence. "But I will not restore them into your hands—I will destroy them in your presence—and this shall be done immediately after I am satisfied that restitution has been made to the Earl of Normanton."

"And how—how," falteringly asked Wilfrid, "will you thus satisfy yourself?"

"Some means must be devised," responded Pelham, "by which I may become an ear-witness, if not an eye-witness, of whatsoever passes at your interview with the Earl of Norman-

ton. That door—whither does it lead? with what place does it communicate?"

"It is a small breakfast-parlour, as you may see," answered Middleton, throwing open the door to which Francis had alluded.

"Good!" said the young man. "The Earl of Normanton is in town; and he will not return to Richmond for the next day or two. You must write a note, requesting his lordship to favour you with his presence here this evening at eight o'clock precisely, as you have a matter of the utmost importance to communicate. A few minutes before eight I shall call again—you will take care to be alone—and that parlour will serve to conceal me during your interview with his lordship. My presence there will answer two purposes. In the first place it will enable me to satisfy myself that you make full and complete restitution of the sum which you gained from him: and in the second place, I shall be enabled to make my appearance and intercede on your behalf in case the Earl, contrary to my present expectations, should threaten harsh measures. But if his lordship consent to act leniently, my presence there may continue unknown to him. Now, Mr. Middleton—in one word, is everything to take place according to the plan that I have sketched out?"

"It is," answered Wilfrid.

Pelham bowed coldly and distantly; and turning away, was about to quit the room, when the door was thrown open—and the servant Announced, "Mr. Cranston and Captain O'Halloran."

CHAPTER XXXI.

WILFRID AND HIS ACCOMPLICES.

Wilfrid at once made a rapid sign to his two accomplices, as much as to bid them be upon their guard in the presence of the other visitor whom they found there; and he said, "These are friends of mine, Mr. Pelham. You have heard their names mentioned: it is not therefore necessary to repeat them."

Cranston made an uncouth, ungainly bow; and Captain O'Halloran gave a sort of military salute, by raising his right hand, with two fingers upturned, towards his forehead. Pelham inclined his head even more distantly than he had just now done to Wilfrid himself: for at the first glance he liked as little as could be the aspect of Wilfrid's two friends. He was about to pass out of the room, when there was something in the tone of Ned Cranston's voice, as he said, "Your most obedient, sir,"—which made Pelham stop short and survery the two individuals with some little degree of attention. Cranston and O'Halloran now stared at him in a half-insolent manner, as much as to bid him defiance in respect to any particular opinion that he might think fit to entertain concerning them. Pelham slowly withdrew his eyes, but with a sort of confused uncertainty expressed in his countenance; and tarrying no longer, he issued from the apartment.

"Who the deuce is that jackanapes, friend Middleton?" demanded Ned Cranston.

"Jackanapes, indeed!" said Wilfrid, bitterly: then having cautiously opened the door, and peeped forth to assure himself that the object of

their discourse was not loitering outside upon the landing, he asked, "Did you not hear me address him by the name of Pelham?"

"Pelham—Pelham?" said Cranston, repeating the name to himself, as if he thought it was not altogether unfamiliar.

"Yes," responded Wilfrid; "it appears that he is very intimate with General Ruthven."

"Oh! don't bother about the young fool," interjected O'Halloran quickly: "we have other things to talk of. Let us to the point. How much did you win last night?"

Wilfrid gave no immediate response: he was at a loss how to break to his accomplices the intelligence which he feared would lead them to create such a storm as to disturb the other inmates of the house, and perhaps the neighbours likewise.

"Come, now, friend Middleton," said Mr. Cranston, in his rough powerful voice, "no nonsense with us, you know. Don't think you can put us off with just about half our regulars. Must he think so, O'Halloran?"

"I should rather fancy not, Ned," replied the Captain, cocking his hat very fiercely.

"We should be sure to find out how the game stood last night," resumed Cranston: "yes—we should be certain to find it out by some means or another. Shouldn't we be sure, O'Halloran?"

"Cease this prating, gentlemen!" interrupted Wilfrid. "I had no intention of turning round upon you——"

"Then why look so suspicious?" demanded Cranston; "and why not give a plain answer when a plain question is put? Isn't that it, O'Halloran?"

"Silence!" ejaculated Wilfrid, petulently. "I have got something to tell you—it is not my fault—but do not fly into a rage—and instead of blustering and bullying, see if you can't give me your advice."

"Well," said Cranston. "I think you had better explain yourself:" and he took a seat. "Had he not better explain himself, O'Halloran?"

"The sooner the more agreeable, Ned," replied the Captain, who also took a chair.

"In a word, then, gentlemen," resumed Wilfrid, "I won three thousand pounds last night——"

"You ought to have made it five, interrupted Ned Cranston. "But never mind—you will do better next time. According to agreement half is to come to me and O'Halloran: that's fifteen hundred. Seven hundred and fifty for you, O'Halloran—seven hundred and fifty for me."

"Stop!" exclaimed Wilfrid, who was in a state of the most feverish excitement. "Will you listen to me?" he impatiently demanded. "That young fellow, Pelham, knows everything—he has got the dice in his possession—and he insists upon the completest restitution towards the Earl of Normanton."

"But you have not made it?" demanded Cranston and O'Halloran, both speaking excitedly, and as it were in the same breath.

"No—not yet," replied Middleton; "it is to take place at eight o'clock this evening;" and he then explained the arrangements entered into with Francis Pelham—or rather

we should say *dictated* by that young gentleman.

Cranston and O'Halloran exchanged looks of the supremest dissatisfaction, mingled with anger, and not altogether apart from alarm and apprehension: and then Cranston exclaimed in his great rough voice, "You do not mean to tell us, Middleton, that you are such a fool as to think of giving up this money? Can he be such a fool, O'Halloran?"

"Impossible, Ned!" responded the Captain.

"Now look you, gentlemen," interposed Wilfrid, "it is very easy for you to sit there and deliver your opinions without at all consulting mine. I ask you to deliberate *with* me, and not to dictate *to* me. I am completely in this young man's power——"

"Yes," exclaimed Cranston, "so far as London is concerned—perhaps it may be so. But England is a large place—and there's Scotland—and Ireland too, for that matter. Isn't there Ireland, O'Halloran?"

"I rather think so," replied the Captain: "for the Emerald Isle had the honour of giving me birth. To be sure, Ned!—you are quite right! We must divide the money according to arrangements—we can all three show London a clean pair of heels—and what is to prevent us from dropping down in Edinburgh, or Dublin, or elsewhere, under three new names—and those the prettiest, the neatest, and the most aristocratic we can possibly think of?"

"For my part," observed Cranston, "I shall not be at all sorry to turn my back upon London: for I don't half like——"

"Come, come, gentlemen," interrupted Wilfrid, impatiently, "you are dictating again instead of deliberating. At all events be so kind as to hear *me*. It does not suit me to dare exposure—to have my name branded—to be kicked out of all society—and to be ruined beyond the hope of redemption. I have schemes in progress——"

"All this is humbug!" interrupted Cranston roughly. "If you flatter yourself that you will yet marry your cousin the Leicestershire heiress, you are grievously out in your reckoning: for everybody knows that you are completely done in that quarter. Isn't he done in that quarter, O'Halloran?"

"To be sure Ned," answered the Captain; "and even if he wasn't, what the deuce has that to do with us? We can't afford to wait till he marries his rich cousin; and as for living on such an expectancy, we should all get as lean as the whipping-post."

"We need not discuss that topic," said Wilfrid. "I wish you would listen to me! I have no more inclination to give up this money than you have that it should be given up. There are two alternatives: either the money *must* be given up—or we must put our heads together to devise a scheme for turning the tables so completely against this fellow Pelham——

"We will have nothing to do with your schemes," interrupted Ned Cranston with dogged ferocity: "we call upon you to stick to your bargain, and hand us over without any further parley our share of the money. Come now, that's English. Isn't that English, O'Halloran?"

"And Irish too," answered the Captain, assuming his fiercest aspect. "Come, friend Middleton, hand over the regulars."

"No—I will not!" answered Wilfrid, with a determined air. "I will not plunge headlong into ruin and have all my hopes defeated for your sakes."

"Then, by jingo!" vociferated Ned Cranston, "we will——

"Beware of threats," interrupted Middleton; "or you will force me to use them likewise."

"What do you mean? demanded Cranston, with a horrid imprecation.

"I mean," rejoined Wilfrid resolutely, "that if you insist upon me ruining myself, rest assured I will keep no terms with you. Do you understand?—or must I speak more plainly still?"

Cranston and O'Halloran exchanged looks which for a moment were to a certain degree expressive of confusion: but the next instant they both assumed an air of bullying ferocity—the former exclaiming in his rough brutal voice, "And pray what the deuce do you mean by talking to us gentlemen in such a style?"

"If you ever knew that I showed myself a coward," replied Wilfrid, "you would perhaps have some reason for putting on these airs and daring to talk with such accents. But I will come to the point. A single word from me proves Mr. Cranston and Captain O'Halloran to have been the assailants of Mr. Hamer, as they subsequently were of myself."

"Well," said Ned Cranston savagely, "we saw that this was running in your head: but what of it? You don't dare turn tell-tale against us."

"Not as long as we have a proper understanding together," answered Wilfrid, who was now gathering a certain degree of composure in proportion as he found himself able to reduce his two accomplices to a milder bearing,—which indeed they had both assumed as he had spoken with calm resoluteness. "But if on the other hand," he continued, "You compel me to a course which means nothing else than total ruin for the future as well as for the present, you cannot be surprised if I shall turn round and wreak a bitter vengeance upon you both."

"Well, let us understand each other," said Cranston, with a sort of sullen yielding. "You have said that you do not want to give up the money; and this young fellow is to be here at eight to-night to hide himself in that room. What is to prevent us——Isn't that it, O'Halloran?"

"Yes—that's it, Ned," responded the miscreant's colleague, with a look of diabolical significancy. "What indeed is to prevent us?"—and he made a motion with his hand against his own neck, as much as to indicate a throttling process.

"No—by heaven, no!" exclaimed Middleton, starting up in horror from his seat.

"Why you didn't think we meant it," said the Captain, endeavouring to turn the matter off with a coarse chuckling laugh: for he at once saw that Wilfrid would not fall into the murderous view of himself and companion. "But there is surely something to be done——eh, Ned?"

"An idea strikes me!" interjected Cranston: "and by heaven, it's a glorious one!"

"Bear in mind," said Wilfrid, that I am completely in this young fellow's power—not only in respect to the matter we are talking of, but there are other things which he can tell concerning me——"

"But would they be believed," asked Cranston, "if this young Pelham himself was ruined in reputation?"

"No," ejaculated Middleton with avidity. "What do you mean, Ned? Haste!—speak, speak!"

Mr. Cranston proceeded to explain his views—frequently interrupting himself however to make his wonted appeals to O'Halloran, who as usual corroborated or assented to everything he uttered: but as the scheme gradually developed itself, Wilfrid Middleton entered more zealously into it—and the deliberation was carried on in half-hushed voices for some time. At length Cranston and O'Halloran took their leave; and Wilfrid sat himself down to pen a letter to the Earl of Normanton,—requesting the favour of a visit from his lordship in the evening at eight o'clock, to discuss a matter of the most serious importance.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE AUBURN TRESS.

The reader will recollect that Francis Pelham left the Earl of Normanton and General Ruthven alone together at the mansion of the latter. The nobleman and the veteran continued to discourse for some little while after the young gentleman had thus taken his departure; and the conversation turning upon some literary subject, the Earl of Normanton chanced to express his wish to see a particular book which was both curious and rare, and a copy of which General Ruthven happened to possess. The General could not however immediately lay his hand upon it: but he promised that so soon as it was found, he would either send or take it to his lordship's abode.

When the Earl took his leave, the General instituted a search for the volume; and presently disinterred it from an obscure nook in his library. His daughter was not in a humour to take an airing in the carriage—he himself wanted a walk—and thinking that he might as well have an object for this walk, he decided upon taking the book, which was but a small one, to the Earl's town-house. The mansion was only about a mile distant from the General's own residence: and he was not therefore long in reaching it. He was told by the hall-porter that the Earl had re-entered about half-an-hour back, and that he had gone to his library. The General knew the way thither: and with the familiarity of a friend who felt that he might make his appearance unannounced, he repaired to the library—dispensing with the service of the liveried lacquey who offered to escort him thither. On opening the door he perceived the Earl sitting at the table, a drawer of which was open;—and with his back turned towards the General, the nobleman appeared to be absorbed in the contemplation of some object

which he held in his hands, and which he seemed to have taken from that drawer. Indeed, so profound was the Earl of Normanton's pre-occupation that he did not hear the opening of the door: he did not move upon his seat—but sat with his head inclined, as if his looks were intently fixed on some object of intensest interest. At the same time it struck General Ruthven that a low and subdued sigh was wafted to his ear; and he regretted having availed himself of his intimacy with the Earl thus to intrude unannounced upon his privacy. He was about to retreat for the purpose of tapping at the door, so as to make his presence known—when the Earl suddenly looked round.

It seemed as if the nobleman's first impulse was to consign the object of his interest with haste and confusion back to the drawer: but the next moment recovering his self-possession, he said, "No—why should I?"

These words were evidently spoken in a musing manner: but they were nevertheless uttered loud enough to catch the ear of General Ruthven,—who, feeling his position to be somewhat awkward and embarrassed, hastened to say, "My dear Earl, I am afraid that I have acted indiscreetly, and that I have intruded at a moment when you would wish to be alone."

"You, my dear General," answered the Earl, "as a much-loved friend of my late father, can never be an intruder in the house of his son."

General Ruthven now perceived that the Earl of Normanton held in his hand a paper from which flowed forth a long auburn tress,—a tress of that rich and precious shade which seemed as if the luxuriant growth of hair to which it originally belonged had caught the sunbeams and imprisoned them amongst its golden masses. Yet the tress was not of the hue of yellow gold—but looked like the burnished metal: or, borrowing a simile from the seasons, it might be likened unto the deepening of summer's bright glory into the richness of an autumnal hue. Upon that long tress the eyes of the Earl again rested with a deep and mournful pensiveness; and as, after a while, he slowly raised his looks to the countenance of the General, and perceived that the latter was likewise contemplating the same object, the Earl said, "This, my dear friend, is the only memorial that remains to me of that which was both the brightest and the saddest episode of my life."

"Again must I beseech your pardon," observed the veteran, "for having intruded——"

"And again must I assure you," interrupted the Earl, "that it is impossible for you to appear in the light of an intruder here."

"I came to bring you this book," said the General, placing the volume upon the table. "And now, my dear Earl, you will permit me to withdraw?"

"No," said Normanton: "you have now seen this memorial of my happiest and saddest days: it is the key to the tenour of a long period of my life, from a very youthful date. If you have an hour to spare, you must bestow it upon me now."

"I have," answered the General: and he took the seat which the nobleman indicated.

The Earl—whose air the while expressed a profound and mournful reverence, mingled with an affable pensive tenderness—consigned the auburn tress back to the drawer, which he closed—but he did not lock it: then resuming the seat from which he had risen on observing the General, he remained for a few moments absorbed in a melancholy reverie.

"You cannot conjecture, my dear friend," he at length said, "why upon leaving your abode ere now, and on returning to my own house, I came straight to the library—unlocked this drawer—and drew forth my cherished treasure, over which I sat in a long, long reverie of contemplation. Do you remember that a part of our discourse, when I was just now at your mansion, and while Francis Pelham was present, turned upon gambling? I may have appeared to speak of it with the thoughtless levity of a profligate gamester: yet it is with me a resource rather than a vice—it is a recreation, and not a dissipated pursuit. But this may seem mere sophistry in your estimation: it may appear the absurdest and flimsiest attempt to salve over my own conscience and to justify myself in your eyes. Nevertheless, in the same way that I have just spoken of gaming, would I also speak of the use of wine. My habits, I know, pass for being more or less dissipated—and they may be so: but in the pursuit thereof, no man suffers except myself—for if I even chance to win a few hundreds, on the other hand I lose thousands; and by indulging in deep potations of the grape's precious juice, I injure no constitution but my own. General Ruthven," added the Earl impressively, "do you know wherefore I play—drink deep—keep late hours—frequent questionable resorts—surround myself with the gay, and perhaps the dissolute?—do you know why, or can you guess wherefore I do all these? Is it because I am unhappy—because my soul is stricken with a wretchedness for which medicine has no balm—the physician's art no panacea; and therefore it seeks those stimulants which, however unhealthy or reprehensible, are nevertheless the only means of weaning it away from a too keen contemplation of the past—the only resource where the numbing of its sensitiveness may be found!"

General Ruthven listened to this speech with the deepest interest, and with an equal amount of compassion. Yet he was not altogether surprised at it. More than once—especially in years long past—whispers had reached him to the effect that the nobleman had in his youthful period, before he succeeded to his father's rank and estates, experienced a severe disappointment where his heart's best affections were engaged. And now that tress of auburn, with the hue of burnished gold, naturally appeared to associate itself with the past history of the Earl; and General Ruthven awaited in silence, but with sympathizing looks, until the nobleman should continue speaking.

"I am about to tell you a tale, my dear General," resumed the Earl at length, "which I have never as yet breathed—I mean in all its complete-

ness—in the ear of a living soul. I scarcely know what influence now leads me to volunteer this revelation to you: but nevertheless that influence *is* upon me—mysterious and unaccountable—and I must obey it. It is altogether a narrative which you cannot possibly hear without interest,—a narrative to which belong smiles the brightest as well as tears the bitterest—a tale the memory of which seems to expand at first into the sunniest heaven, but only to deepen at last into the blackest night of hell. These are strong terms: but if you listen, you will find that they are justified."

The Earl paused for a few moments, as if to exert the necessary effort to enter upon a relation which he knew to be chequered with such startling contrasts: and then he continued in the following manner:—

"You are aware that my father had two sons, of whom I was by some years the younger. At the age of fourteen I was sent to a large public school in a distant county; and at the same time my elder brother, Herbert, proceeded to the University. At the school which I thus entered, there were the sons of three or four other noblemen; and each of us was entitled to the appellation of 'Lord' by courtesy. But the great majority of the pupils at that school belonged to the families of country squires and wealthy gentlemen; and it was a rule with the master that to prevent all invidious distinctions no patrician title should be borne by any of the pupils who might in reality possess it. Thus, instead of being addressed or spoken of as Lord Derwent—which was my proper denomination as the early of Normanton's younger son—I was simply known as Mr.—or rather Master Eugene Derwent. These little particulars may seem trivial—but they are not without their importance. The master of the school was a Doctor of Divinity; and he was particular in compelling hispupils to attend divine worship with regularity. But from the very first I needed no compulsion nor persuasion: there was an inducement to make me not only visit the church at morning and evening service, but likewise to look forward to the Sabbath with the intensest longing. You will scarcely imagine that it was any deep religious feeling which thus took so strong a hold upon a boy of fourteen: no—it was the presence in that church of the loveliest being that my eyes had ever settled upon. She was about my own age—a girl—a child—but, oh, how lovely! Everything that was ethereal seemed to constitute that assemblage of charms which rendered her so exquisitely fascinating—so truly angelic! Somewhat tall for her age, she was slightly formed, but with a symmetry giving promise of admirably-modelled proportions. Indeed, that symmetry was already perfect for one of girlhood'syears,—the figure upright and graceful—a natural elegance in every movement—and so sweet an air of innocence over all, that, I repeat, she seemed not to be a creature of earth, but to belong to the company of blessed angels. Need I tell you that her hair was of the richest auburn—or that it was of the wealthiest luxuriance? You have seen that tress; and

though years have dimmed its natural gloss, yet does it still preserve a sufficient beauty to prove how precious and how glorious was the original growth. She had large eyes, of a clear, deep blue—expressive alike of reflection and feeling, yet beaming with the light of girlhood's gaiety and artlessness. Her complexion was so dazzlingly fair that even when a stray tress of her burnished gold hair wandered round her throat, it was in strong contrast with the pure snowy whiteness thereof. On the cheeks there was the carnation tinge of health and youth: her lips, exquisitely cut, could be likened only in their moist redness to wet coral; her teeth were as orient pearls. She was neatly and even genteelly clad—but without pretension, much less costliness: for her mother, if not in circumstances absolutely humble, possessed only a very modest competency. Mrs. Markland—for that was her name—was a gentlewoman, the widow of an officer; and Agnes was her only child. The widow was much afflicted: for she had lost her husband at an early period of the marriage state; and grief had brought on a malady from which she only recovered to find herself a wreck in respect to health, and deprived of the blessing of sight. You may easily suppose that Agnes was her darling and her treasure—the only joy of her seared and widowed heart. They dwelt in a neat little cottage, about two miles from the town; and it was a touching and interesting sight to behold that lovely girl conducting her blind mother on the Sabbath to the pew which she occupied at the church. It was situated in the body of that church; and the pupils of the school occupied the front range of seats in one of the side galleries. The very first Sunday that I attended divine worship there, it seemed to me as if a beautiful vision were gradually dawning upon my eyes, as my attention was thus whiled away from the discourse of the minister to the contemplation of Agnes Markland."

Here the Earl of Normanton became for a few moments so overpowered with the memories of the past, that he was forced to pause; and General Ruthven, already deeply interested in the narrative, remained silent, awaiting the continuation. At length his lordship was enabled to resume as follows:—

"For many, many Sundays, I was forced to content myself with the mere contemplation of that beautiful being from a distance. When the service was over, she and her mother invariably waited until the greater part of the congregation had quitted the church—so that the poor blind lady might be led forth by her loving and affectionate daughter without exciting attention. The pupils had to return to the school in procession; and thus weeks passed way before I had an opportunity of contemplating Agnes any nearer than from the gallery to the pew where she sat. But at length, in consequence of some repairs which were being undertaken in the gallery, the pupils were shifted to different pews in the body of the church; and fortune—dare I call it *fortune*, after all that has occurred?—assigned me to a seat immediately behind the pew occupied by Agnes and her mother. Now I beheld her

near!--now I could gaze, while affecting to be occupied with my book, upon the angelic creature! And how truly beautiful was she!—how sweetly charmingly interesting, that young girl of my own age! The closeness of contemplation which I now enjoyed, diminished not one little the impression that her loveliness had made upon my mind when seen from a comparative distance: on the contrary, she in every way fulfilled the idea I had formed of her. It was almost with a feeling of jealousy that I swept my looks along the pew in which I sat, to ascertain whether any one of my boy companions surveyed her with the same youthful adoration as that which I experienced towards the fair creature: but my fears on this point were relieved. To be brief, General Ruthven, I already loved madly—passionately—devotedly: though a mere child, my heart expanded into maturest dimensions when filled with the affection which thus seized upon it for Agnes Markland."

The Earl of Normanton passed his hand slowly across his brows, as if to subdue somewhat the poignant keenness of the recollections which were trooping through his brain in anticipation of what he had yet to relate; and it was with a tremulous voice that he again spoke.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

CONTINUATION OF THE EARL OF NORMANTON'S NARRATIVE.

"It may be permitted," said the Earl, "to one who has passed his fortieth year—whose heart is blighted—who is but the wreck of his former self—and who has no vanity to be gratified—it may be permitted to me, I say, to affirm that I was far from an ill-looking or unpromising youth——"

"I remember you at that age," interrupted General Ruthven; "and I may be allowed to observe that for personal beauty and youthful elegance of form you were the object of general attention on the part of all who visited at your noble father's house."

"Thanks for the remark, my dear General," continued the Earl: "you have helped me over that which I scarcely dared say for myself. It is not my intention to dwell at unnecessary length upon this portion of my narrative. I was not slow in discovering how deeply I was enamoured of Agnes Markland; and as a bold adventurous boy, I was not likely to be restrained by school regulations from seeking an opportunity to form the acquaintance of the object of this love. Accordingly, one day—during the hours of recreation—I escaped from the playground: the two miles which separated the school from the cottage, were speedily accomplished; and then, as fortune would have it, an accident furthered my design. Scarcely had I reached the vicinage of Mrs. Markland's dwelling, when I beheld Agnes sinking from terror in the presence of a savage dog which was barking at her furiously, and seemed every moment intent upon springing at her. To snatch up a huge stone and dash it at the brute's head, was the work of an instant; and so effectually was it done, that the missile killed the animal upon the spot. Then how charming the task to reassure her—to press her hand in my own—and to look into her beautiful

blue eyes, as I inquired if she were hurt? The little incident occurred at a distance of about a hundred yards from the cottage—Agnes having strayed forth thus far alone to gather some early violets (it being the spring-time) for her mother. With artless kindness she invited me to enter the cottage—assuring me that her mother would only be too happy to thank me for the service I had rendered her: but swift as lightning the thought swept through my mind that Mrs. Markland might entertain a suspicious wonder at my presence there—for if questioned, I should have known not what excuse to make. I therefore declined—and had no difficulty in persuading the innocent Agnes that it was better not to mention the incident at all to her mother, as it would only excite her, invalid as she was. Thus did our acquaintance commence. The next time I saw Agnes, she was walking in the garden belonging to the cottage; and she conversed with me at the gate. Two or three times a week, for many consecutive ones, did I manage to see her in the same way: she never asked me why I was so often in that neighbourhood, although she knew that I belonged to the school which was two miles off. By degrees she grew accustomed to these visits of mine; and to be brief, General Ruthven, she learnt to love me. I saw that I had thus made an impression upon her heart long before she herself suspected it; and thus months and months passed away. She did not tell her mother that she was accustomed to meet me in the neighbourhood of the dwelling: it was not that she hypocritically studied concealment—but it was that as she had not at the time mentioned the incident which rendered us acquainted, she feared subsequently to do so lest she should be chided. Besides, what young girl, however well principled, spontaneously reveals that which is in reality a nascent love although she suspects it not? Months and months passed away, I said; and thus were our meetings continued. They were short, but for me full of a deep ineffable rapture—and for her likewise when I one day confessed that I loved her. She only knew me as Eugene Derwent: I had no reason for concealing my proper title and my patrician family; but we never spoke upon these subjects—and it never occurred to me to mention them. If we had speculated for the future—if we had seriously deliberated on the chances of our union being eventually permitted—if, in short, we had spoken of worldly things, doubtless the affairs of my family and other general circumstances would have entered into our discourse. But it was one delicious dream of love—one long enraptured vision, which was all in all in itself, and which was never broken in upon by those commonplace particulars on which lovers of a riper age would have been sure to touch. During the vacations we dared not correspond: and thus no letters were exchanged—nothing transpired to show her that I was other than plain Eugene Derwent. All this may appear singular—but it is not the less true: and thus did a couple of years pass. We were then both sixteen; and never was purer, holier, chaster love experienced by youth and damsel. No one

but our two selves were acquainted therewith: we had never said to each other that it was a secret—but yet, as if by a tacit understanding, we cherished it as such. On reaching my sixteenth year I was to leave the school; and then all n a moment, when this announcement was made to me, I was startled as it were from a delightful dream—I was awakened to the contemplation of some of the realities of my position. It was my father's intention that I should perfect my education at home under the supervision of a private tutor: for the irregular conduct of my brother at the University had decided my father upon this course with respect to myself. I hastened off to the cottage:—amidst bitterest weeping I informed Agnes that I was to return no more—I vowed eternal constancy—and I proposed that we should correspond. She also was weeping as if her young heart would break; and she mentioned her mother! She now seemed to feel that she had been practising a long course of dissimulation towards that blind and unsuspecting parent: she had reached an age which was capable of deliberate reflection; and in the most delicate terms she gave me to understand that the time had come when, influenced by a sense of duty, she must reveal everything to her mother. I at once assented: my heart was frank and true—my love was full of hope—and I could not think it possible that such a love was to experience obstacles. We went together into the widow's presence: we threw ourselves at her feet—we told her everything. At first she was overwhelmed with dismay—with affright—and partially with anger: but when from our discourse she gleaned enough to convince her how truly innocent—how pure, how chaste was that love of boy and girl which had subsisted between us for two long years, she pardoned us—she spoke kindly—she was profoundly touched. Then, in order to convince her that she need not be ashamed of him who at some future day might hope to be her son-in-law, I spoke of my family—I proclaimed who I was. But the effect produced was very different from what I had anticipated: the widow was seized with a renewed consternation—and Agnes was stricken with dismay; as if her eyes were suddenly opened to the immensity of the gulf which separated her social position from my own. Mrs. Markland was very sad—but she did not reproach me; there was doubtless so much ingenuous candour in the protestations which I made, that she was convinced of my honour, my sincerity, and my love in respect to her daughter. But she gave me to understand that it was impossible an enagagement could exist between us or a correspondence be permitted without the consent of my father; and she insisted that to him I should reveal everything. I have already said that my love was full of hope: and I may add that I knew so little of the world that I fancied I had only to beseech my sire's consent to an engagement with Agnes in order to obtain it readily. In this happy delusion I lost much of the bitterness of parting; and yet it was with many, many tears that I tore myself away from Agnes. I pro-

ceeded to London, still full of hope and confidence; and when I threw myself at my father's feet and confessed everything, I saw that his brow became stern. Never shall I forget the language in which he answered me! 'If you were my elder son,' he said, 'and the heir to my property, you might possibly be permitted to lull yourself in this boyish dream until awakened therefrom at once. I have no fortune to give you: you have nothing but a mere title of courtesy; but your patrician rank, if unsullied, will aid you in carving out your own career. Let this be your only aim—your only thought; and in due time you may hope by some suitable alliance to obtain an addition to whatsoever revenues you may earn for yourself. I shall write to Mrs. Markland; and it will be such a letter that, rest assured, if you attempt to correspond with her daughter, your own letters will be either returned unopened or else left unanswered.'—Such was my father's stern language; and a thunder-bolt falling at my feet, could not have overwhelmed me with a greater consternation."

Here the nobleman paused again: again too he passed his hand across his brow; and it was some minutes ere he resumed his narrative.

"Two years passed away—two years during which I was kept under the unremitting supervision of a tutor, and a portion of which was occupied by a tour on the Continent. Yet many and many a letter did I write to Agnes, assuring her of my constancy—breathing the most passionate language of love—and, heaven knows with what sincerity, vowing that her image was never absent from my mind! But to these letters I received no answer. Yet I did not despair. I felt convinced that Agnes loved me with a truthfulness, a devotion, and a sincerity equal to the love that I cherished for her. The two years passed—I was eighteen—and as you may remember, General Ruthven, my brother Herbert at that period lost his life by the accidental explosion of a fellow-collegian's gun when they were out shooting. That occurrence, in one sense so deeply painful, was in another the source of a wild thrilling hope. I was now Viscount Derwent—the heir to the inalienably entailed estates belonging to the proud name of Normanton. But still by my outward demeanour I betrayed not the thoughts that occupied my mind, nor the hopes that filled my breast. After my brother's funeral, I for delicacy's sake suffered a few months of mourning seclusion to expire before I resolved to take any positive step in the affair which so deeply interested me. But just as I had thus settled my purpose, my father one morning addressed me in these terms;—"Your position is now widely different from that which it was when on leaving school you spoke to me on a certain subject. I have no doubt that by this time you are cured of your boyish passion, and that you see the folly of it: or at least I hope and trust so. But if I am in error, remember, Eugene, that you have yet three years to pass before you can call yourself your own master; and as your parent, I beseech and implore you will think of nothing serious—you will not even attempt to see Miss Markland, until

you attain the age of twenty-one. You will then be at liberty to follow your own inclinations;—nor should I any longer seek to control them: but heaven help you if you make a wrong choice in respect to her who may accompany you to the altar! As for the present I intend to put confidence in you: I hope it will not be abused. You are released from the supervision of a tutor: go forth into the world; mingle in society, travel if you will: I shall seek no account of your actions: and I hope that this confiding spirit on my part will be duly appreciated and will find its recompense in your duteous obedience.'—Thus spoke my father; and he shed tears, for he was still deeply, deeply affected by the loss of his first-born son—that son whose remains slept in the same grave with our mother, who, as you are aware, General, died in our infancy!"

"I know," answered Ruthven, "that the late Earl of Normanton lost his wife at a period when you could have scarcely attained your third year."

"It was so. But now let me proceed with my narrative. Being at length liberated from the thraldom of a tutor's supervision," continued the nobleman, "I was my own master, save and except with regard to the injunctions that my father had laid upon me. But what was the first use that I made of my liberty? Oh, when my sire's mandate was weighed against the love which I bore for Agnes, how immensely preponderating was the latter! I sped off into that midland county where she dwelt: never, never shall I forget how throbbed my heart—how beat my pulse when I alighted from a post-chaise at the garden-gate where we had so often and often met. And Agnes appeared upon the threshold of the cottage——Yes, it was her own self: but heavens! she was in deep mourning. I ran—I flew towards her: in a moment she was clasped to my breast, where she lay sobbing and weeping with woe and joy. It was a long time before our emotions were sufficiently calm to admit of explanations. Her mother had been dead about eight months: Agnes had no relations with whom she could seek a home—she had continued therefore to reside at the cottage, with the old—indeed, almost superannuated domestic who had been long in the same service and who had nursed her in her infancy. But she had been left in very straitened circumstances; and it was only by the closest economy she had kept that roof over her head. My letters had all been received: but Mrs. Markland had exacted a solemn pledge from her daughter that she would place every one *unopened* in that mother's hand; and by her were they most probably destroyed. For it would appear that my father's letter, written immediately after I confessed my love to him, had pointed out in delicate though impressive terms, the impossibility of such an alliance ever receiving his consent. Mrs. Markland therefore conjured her daughter to banish me from her memory, and to look upon the past as a dream which could never be realized. But Agnes had faith and hope; and every time the postman stopped at the gate to deliver a letter, she regarded the

missive as a pledge of my own fidelity, although she never penetrated ts contents. And now in person was I enabled to assure her of that fidelity: I told her how circumstances were changed with me—how was my father's heir—and how he d given me a sort of pledge that if on the attainment of my majority I chose to link my fate with that of Agnes, he would no longer oppose it, although he might not positively assent to it. Need I say how y presence and my language—the proofs of my constancy and my protestations of unchang ng love—infused happiness into the heart of her who had experienced so much sorrow? And how eminently beautiful was she!—for though affliction had rendered her cheeks pale and her looks deeply pensive, yet when happiness brought the roses back to those cheeks, and her ey es brightened up with the lustre o f love and joy, she was an angel in appearance once again. She had grown tall—her figure had expanded somewhat from the slenderness of girlhood: she was a perfect model of feminine symmetry and beauty. Heavens, how I loved her! I resolved to pass some weeks in the town, that I might visit her daily; and in order that my father should not obtain a clue to my whereabouts, I adopted a feigned name. Agnes—totally inexperienced in the world, without a female friend to advise her, and full of the sublimest confidence in that love of mine which had already given such proofs of its lasting devotion—willingly acceded to any plan that I thought fit to suggest. The superannuated old servant was almost in her dotage, and saw no wrong in the constant presence of a young man at the cottage. Thus weeks flew by; and at length I ventured to propose a private marriage to Agnes. I have already said that she abandoned herself wholly to my guidance—she was so artless, so innocent, so trustful, so loving! I therefore had no difficulty in obtaining an assent: for if for a moment she raised some scruple in respect to my father, I readily overcame it by a sophistry which love rendered all the more earnest and ingenious. You see, General Ruthven, that not for a single instant did I endeavour to take a dishonourable advantage of my influence over Agnes. I would sooner have perished than injure one of the golden tresses belonging to the rich masses of her hair: I would rather have laid violent hands upon myself than wilfully bring a tear into her soft blue eye, or plant a dagger in the heart which beat with love and tenderness for me. I do not call your attention to these facts through any vain-glorious sentiment—nor because I wish to represent myself as better than other men; but simply because I would have you understand the immensity of my love—its purity and its holiness. And what other species of love could possibly be inspired by that angelic girl—so winning in all her ways, so captivating and fascinating, without for an instant being conscious of her own powers to please! You can understand how I loved her, and what rapture filled my soul when she agreed to be mine. But now came a difficulty. I was under age, and therefore could not obtain a license,

unless by misrepresentation—to which I could not think of descending. To have the banns published would necessitate the announcement of my real name and rank for three consecutive weeks; and it was next to impossible that my father would fail to hear of it. At length an idea struck me: I would take Agnes to Scotland, where we could be united according to the forms existing in that kingdom. Yet I confess that I had some scruple with regard to a ceremony from which everything solemn, decorous, and holy was absent. There was, however, no alternative; and we proceeded to Scotland,—leaving the old woman in charge of the cottage; for she was too aged to travel—and charity prompted me to ensure a home for the faithful dependant who had been in the same service for so many, many years. I engaged a respectable lady's-maid to attend upon Agnes; and we set off. Our hands were united according to the Scotch forms; and we proceeded on a tour to the lakes in Cumberland. I thence wrote my father—but without informing him what I had done. I trembled lest he should discover the marriage; and therefore I journeyed with my bride under a fictitious name. I received a letter from the family physician, stating that my father was exceedingly ill, and that he desired my presence. I showed this letter to Agnes; and devotedly though she loved me—afflicting as was the prospect of even the most temporary separation—she nevertheless yielded to a sense of duty, and urged me to proceed at once to London. It had been my intention to provide for her a suitable and comfortable home—and to make such pecuniary arrangements as would leave the old dependant in possession of the cottage where she had dwelt so long, and where it was her wish to die. But the sudden necessity of speeding at once to the metropolis forced me to suspend these intentions; and the ever willing Agnes unhesitatingly agreed to return to the cottage—there to dwell during my absence, which I assured her should not be longer than absolutely necessary. On our way thither the lady's-maid was seized with a sudden and dangerous illness; but it happened that she was thus overtaken by the malady at a town where she had relations. By her special desire we left her in charge of those relations, and returned to the cottage alone. It was agreed that our marriage should be kept profoundly secret—and that Agnes should continue to bear her maiden name: for she had no acquaintances nor friends in the neighbourhood by whom her absence could have been noticed; and therefore she incurred no danger of suffering in her fair fame on that account. When the parting hour came, I exerted every nerve to subdue the extreme violence of my grief; and she for similarly considerate motives did the same. I begged from her a tress of her glorious hair,—that night and morning I might press it to my lips when I breathed my prayers for her well-being; and with the precious tress next to my heart, I tore myself away from her. She lingered on the threshold—I turned to wave my hand

in token of farewell: the sunbeams were reflected in the tears that were streaming down her cheeks—and upon her lips I caught the dimness of her parting smile. It was the face of an angel looking through a sunny April shower! And that tress, General Ruthven——you have seen it——It is here!"

Thus speaking, the Earl of Normanton indicated the drawer to which he had consigned the precious auburn tress: and he availed himself of the opportunity to avert his countenance and rapidly pass his hand across his eyes. General Ruthven was himself affected almost to tears; and it was naught but a habit of discipline which the veteran soldier exercised in respect to the outward betrayal of his feelings, which kept those tears back.

"I repaired to London," resumed the Earl of Normanton, "and found my father stretched, as every one around him believed, upon the bed of death. He was speechless, as well as unconscious of all that was passing. My uncle, Lord Tylden, was present. You remember him, perhaps, General Ruthven—a dissipated, unprincipled man—handsome and gay — always impoverished — and whose character would not bear the faintest scrutiny. Yet I knew him but little then: I knew him better afterwards. He treated me with so much apparent kindness, that in a moment of confidence that was natural enough on the part of one so young as I—for I was not even then nineteen—I revealed to him the secret of my marriage. He professed his delight that I should have so consulted my own happiness as to ensure it; and by his behaviour towards me he won my esteem and regard. I therefore suffered him to exercise in the mansion that influence which should have been more properly wielded by me: and under pretence of keeping my father as tranquil as possible, he sent off a portion of the servants to the Manor at Richmond. One night—it was the fourth after my arrival at home, and when a favourable turn was just developing itself in respect to my father's illness—my chamber was invaded by half a dozen ruffians. I was seized upon—my resistance was desperate—a blow from a bludgeon levelled me senseless on the floor: and when I returned to consciousness—when I returned to consciousness, I say, General Ruthven——I was in a mad-house!"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

CONTINUATION OF THE EARL'S NARRATIVE.

On learning that the nobleman had been consigned to a mad-house, General Ruthven started; and an exclamation of astonishment escaped his lips: for this was the first intimation he had ever received of such having been the fact.

"You may well be surprised," said the Earl of Normanton, not with bitterness, but with a deep and melancholy sense of the fearful wrong he had sustained, although more than twenty years had elapsed since its date: "but for reasons that you will presently hear, the circumstance was ever kept secret. Yes, General Ruthven, I found myself in a mad-house,—not one of those low dens where poor wretches are received at a pauper's price—but one of those splendid establishments

where the revenue paid for the maintenance of the incarcerated individual is supposed to be a proof, in the eyes of the world, of the tender carefulness of his friends in ensuring him a comfortable home and kindly treatment. I need not tell you how I protested against this immurement in a place which to me was the most horrible of prisons: nor need I enter into elaborate details to describe how all those protestations were vain, and how the keeper of the establishment found it to be to his interest to *believe* me mad, whatever his private conviction might really be. You can full well comprehend how anguished were my feelings—how terrific was the sense of agony under which I smarted. Young though I was, I had no difficulty, after some little reflection, in understanding the motives which actuated my villanous uncle, Lord Tylden. He believed that my father's state of unconsciousness would soon pass into complete dissolution; and if I were put out of the way on the ground of lunacy, he—that infamous Lord Tylden—would naturally become my guardian and the superintendent of the estates. To obtain the superintendence of those estates woud be to secure the enjoyment of the revenues—or at least a sufficiency of them to replenish my spendthrift uncle's empty purse, to relieve him from his debts, to extricate him from his difficulties: for I knew that he was extravagant and poor—but I had not until then discovered that he was a villain capable of the blackest turpitude. There were many other inmates of the same establishment,—the greater portion of whom were really weak in their intellects, or else were confirmed idiots, incapable of managing their own affairs: but there were three or four who were as fully in possession of their reason as I myself was, and who had been consigned to that place in consequence of the villanous cupidity of their relatives. We were all closely watched, and the premises were well secured: otherwise you may be certain, my dear General, I should not have remained so long an inmate of that horrible place. For again does a surprise await you——yes, you will indeed be amazed, when I tell you that for nearly eighteen long months was I a prisoner there!"

"Eighteen months?" ejaculated General Ruthven, with mingled indignation and astonishment. "And this cruel—this most ungrounded imprisonment, endured through the villany of a kinsman who ought to have been your friend and protector."

"Yes—nearly eighteen months of a weary and painful imprisonment!" resumed the Earl of Normanton, in a tone profoundly mournful. "Oh, it was indeed enough to goad me into actual madness; and I believe that there were periods when my brain was veritably frenzied, as I thought of my beautiful and adored Agnes. My only consolation—if a consolation that could be which gave poignancy to my anguish for our cruel separation—was that tress of her auburn hair, which had not been taken from me, because I had worn it next to my heart. And yet—if all that I am saying now be not a confusion of contradictory terms—there *was* a certain sense of consolation derived from the possession of

that tress. For hours and hours together would I sit contemplating it—I would press it to my lips—I would weep over it—and then I would give the rein to my imagination, and allow it to wander in the land of dreams, so as to conjure up before me the living object to whose head that tress of burnished gold had belonged. I could then see her smiling in her artless gaiety—or gazing upon me with eyes full of tenderness and love—or even as she looked when shedding upon me the dimness of her parting smile. As weeks and months passed on, I often felt as if goaded to desperation,—until I began to fear that my reason would give way, and that anguish and agony would but too truly qualify me to continue an inmate of a mad-house. I learnt nothing of what was passing in the great world without,—with the single exception that I was one day informed my father had survived the illness which threatened to carry him to the tomb, and that he was getting better. Then, as time rolled on, I wondered that he interfered not in my behalf: I entreated the keeper of the asylum to permit me to write to my father: but I experienced a stern refusal. I watched for an opportunity to escape—and could find none. Thus time, I say, wore on. How immense were the tortures which my soul endured when I wondered what Agnes could possibly think, and what construction she would put upon my absence and silence. Would she consider that I had abandoned her? No—she knew me too well! Would she repair to London to inquire after me? If so, what chance was there that she would be even treated with civility by the uncle who had used her husband so cruelly? In a word, what had become of her? On the day of separation I had only left her a sum of money sufficient for the purposes of two or three months; because I had hoped long ere the lapse of that period, to be enabled to return to her. But when the time had gone by I was half distracted when I thought of the condition to which she might be reduced. Aye—and I thus thought continually—continually! So intolerable became my anguish that if Satan had presented himself and offered to give me a single year's liberty, my soul becoming the price of the boon—I should have assented joyfully, and even gratefully. But I am dwelling at much greater length on this point of my narrative than I had originally proposed: but were I to enter into minute details of all the mingled horrors and agonies—the outbursts of frenzy and the intervals of blank despondency—the soul-felt tortures and the lancinating excruciations, all of which combined to make up the sum of my wretched, wretched existence in that place during a period of nearly eighteen months. I should extend this narrative of mine to a length that would occupy an entire year, instead of confining it to the limit of an hour. At length, one day, the keeper of the asylum sent for me into his own private parlour; and after a long preface—in which he expressed many hopes that I had no ground to complain of the treatment I had experienced, and that whatever my own particular opinion might be, I would give him credit for merely having done his duty consci-

entiously—he announced that I was free. You may probably imagine that I experienced a wild thrilling joy: but it was not so. My soul was smitten with the darkest misgivings in respect to my poor Agnes; and I shuddered with the presentiment that I was only about to regain my liberty in order to find that those apprehensions were to be too fatally confirmed. The asylum was within a few miles of the metropolis; and I sped to the paternal mansion. There I learnt that my father was alive, but reduced by paralysis to physical helplessness and to almost complete mental idiocy. I was moreover informed that Lord Tylden was an inmate of the house—that he had been wounded in a duel—and that he was lying at the point of death. I first of all flew to my father's room: he just knew me—and that was all. But as for whatsoever wrongs I had sustained and the miseries I had endured,—he was evidently ignorant, and therefore innocent of them all! A domestic informed me that Lord Tylden entreated an interview, if only for a few minutes—and that he besought and implored me not to refuse the prayer of a dying man. So bitter were my feelings against him, that I should have rejected his entreaty with scorn and loathing, were it not that I hoped to receive some intelligence of Agnes, and thus be relieved from the suspense which was devouring me: for you will remember, General Ruthven, I informed you that in a moment of confidence I had revealed to my uncle the circumstance of my marriage. Therefore, inspired by that hope, I consented to repair to the chamber of the dying man On entering the room I indeed saw that he had not long to live: death was already affixing its mark upon his countenance as if to claim him as its own. Bitter as my feelings previously were towards him, I could not find it in my heart to level reproaches against one who was passing into a world where he would have to answer for his misdeeds. I therefore awaited in silence whatsoever he might have to say to me; and then, in a low broken voice—speaking with difficulty—his death-pale countenance convulsing with all the horrors of remorse, he made me acquainted with the details of his villany."

The Earl of Normanton stopped for a few moments, and then continued in the following terms:—

"It was when I confided to my uncle the circumstance of my secret marriage, that the diabolic idea of turning it to his own advantage flashed to his mind. To represent that I, the son and heir of an Earl, had yielded to an influence which a low-born and obscure girl had succeeded in exercising over me—that I had been ensnared into this unequal and derogatory alliance—would, my uncle fancied, be sufficient to prove that I was totally unfit to be left at large, and that it was only a prudential act on the part of my relatives to put me under restraint. You cannot be unaware, General Ruthven, of how fearfully calculated is the mechanism of our lunacy laws to aid the designs of such cold-blooded villany. The certificates of two unscrupulous and venal practitioners were easily procured by my heartless

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uncle; and by virtue of this purchased authority was I consigned to a mad-house. It was his hope and belief at the time that my father was on his death-bed, and that, therefore, during the remainder of my minority, he—this unprincipled uncle of mine—would be enabled to act as my guardian and as the supervisor of the estates. His calculations had even gone to a still greater extent: he foresaw the facility with which, by the aid of the execrable law, he might prolong my incarceration in the mad-house even after I should be of age. My parent was not, however, carried by his illness out of this world, as his brother hoped and imagined: yet his recovery from extreme peril left him the paralyzed, the helpless, and the idiotic being I had so lamentably found him. Under those circumstances Lord Tylden's diabolical plans proved to a certain degree successful; for, by keeping me incarcerated, he obtained the undisputed management of all my sire's finances. And now I come to the most painful —the most hideous portion of my narrative. It appeared that about a month after I was consigned to the mad-house, a letter addressed to me in a female hand was delivered at the mansion. It was from Agnes:—she entreated me not to be angry with her for risking a communication which might possibly lead to the revelation of that marriage which she knew I had such urgent reasons for keeping secret: but she was distracted by my unaccountable silence, and was driven wild by the fear that my own letters to her had either been intercepted or had miscarried. It was of vital importance to the working out of my vile uncle's projects that no inquiries should be instituted by Agnes concerning me: for he naturally feared that the devoted love of a young wife would prompt her unweariedly to labour for her husband's release. He trembled lest she should find friends to interest themselves in the matter; and that the result of such investigation would be the laying bare of his matchless scheme of turpitude. What course, therefore, did the cold-blooded villain adopt? Oh, General Ruthven! even now, though so many years have elapsed since that fatal period, I feel as if I could dash my head against that wall—rend my hair out by the roots—or lay violent hands upon myself! But I must be calm—yes, I must be calm, or at least I must maintain composure sufficient to enable me to make known unto you the terrific amount of wrong to which two human beings were rendered the victims—Agnes and myself! Lord Tylden penned an answer to the hapless girl's letter. He told her that in my absence, and as my near relative, he had received and read her communication. He went on to say that the discovery of our secret marriage had given my father such a shock as to prostrate him on a bed of sickness from which he had only risen to become a helpless paralytic—that I, stricken by remorse for the almost parricidal wreck which I had thus wrought had implored my afflicted sire's forgiveness, which was only granted on the condition that I should never see Agnes more. My villanous uncle proceeded to state in his letter that

I had immediately gone abroad, leaving him to break to Agnes my resolve for an eternal separation; and that he was on the very point of communicating with her in that sense, when her own letter arrived. He further informed her that the Scotch marriage was altogether illegal, and therefore invalid—that she had not the claim of a wife upon me—and that at her peril might she assume the rank of Viscountess of Derwent. Such were the black and fiend-like falsehoods which Tylden wrote, and which on his death-bed he thus confessed to me. I conjured him to inform me whether he had since heard of Agnes?—and he replied '*Never!*'—my heart was rent with an anguish in comparison with which all that I had previously experienced seemed as nothing. I could have flung myself upon the dying man and immolated him in my vengeance: I could have torn the very life out of him, were it not that it was fast ebbing away under the influence of a power higher and mightier than mine. His eyes were already glazing under the touch of death; and his last words conveyed an urgent entreaty for my forgiveness, as well as a hope that I would not, when he was gone, hold his name up to execration, by proclaiming his iniquity to the world. My pardon I could not give him—No, I could not!—a terrible presentiment shadowed forth to my mental vision the image of the heart-broken Agnes. Yet I could not suffer him to perish so miserably before my eyes without conceding one part of his prayer; and I therefore pledged myself to secrecy in respect to his guilt so far as the world generally was concerned. He gave up the ghost: I rushed from the presence of the corpse of him who had proved my bitterest, bitterest enemy: and within a quarter of an hour I was seated in a post-chaise—lavishing gold upon the postillions that they might urge their horses to the utmost of their sdeed. It was in the evening that I thus set off,—a miserable evening in winter; so that the aspect of nature herself was sufficient to confirm all my gloomiest presentiments and chill hope itself within me. It was in the gray of the cold misty morning that I came within sight of the cottage. An old woman was opening the shutters: it was the superannuated dependant of whom I have before spoken. She did not recognise me; and instead of answering the questions which I put with all the feverish rapidity of acutest suspense, she gazed upon me with a vague, stolid wonderment. I rushed into the dwelling, in the last hope of finding Agnes there: but in the passage I encountered an elderly gentleman who was a total stranger to me. From him I speedily learnt that the object of my heartfelt interest was not within those walls, and that no one knew what had become of her. My passionate ejaculations of despairing grief induced him to invite me to walk in: and then I learnt as much as he himself could tell relative to the unfortunate Agnes. But this little which he himself knew had only been gathered from the lips of the old domestic; for he came as a stranger into the neighbourhood, to occupy the cottage on hearing that it was to be let several months back; and being a

bachelor, without any household establishment of his own, he had kept the woman to serve him. It appeared that Miss Markland (as Agnes had continued to be called) was plunged into the deepest mental distress by the receipt of some letter from London:—[and from whom that letter came I knew but too well!] She had resided at the cottage for several months after the receipt of this letter, until she suddenly disappeared,—no one, not even the old dependant, knowing whither she went. This woman had occasionally dropped hints to the gentleman, her master, giving him to understand that Miss Markland had been treacherously treated by some one whom she loved; but if ever the elderly bachelor had questioned her farther on the subject, she had merely shaken her head with solemn gravity—occasionally she had wept—but she had given him no additional information."

"And was this all" asked General Ruthven, deeply affected, "that you could learn of the unhappy Agnes?".

"This was all," responded the Earl, mournfully. "You may be assured that questioned the old women closely: but no sooner had she recognised me than she exhibited a loathing and abhorrence which she made no attempt to conceal. Vain was it that I entreated her to listen to me: vain was it that I endeavoured to prove to her how I had been sinned against, and that I was no wilful sinner in respect to my adored Agnes. She was so far childish in her intellects that when once she had entertained a particular idea, she clung to it with the tenacity of doting old age, and nothing could dissuade her from it. She had evidently something to tell; but, to be brief, I could not wring it from her. I went away in despair; and for months and months I prosecuted my inquiries through all that county and the neighbouring ones, in the hope of finding some clue to the fate of Agnes, if she were no more—or to her whereabouts, if she were living. I thought not of home—I thought not even of my paralytic father: I was engrossed—absorbed—wrapped up in one idea only. But months and months, as I have said, passed away during this prosecution of my unwearying inquiries; and all were fruitless. At length I returned to the cottage, in the last but almost desperate hope that the old woman might now be induced to speak out more openly and to tell me that which she evidently had upon her mind. But here was another disappointment:—she had died a few weeks previously. When on her death-bed, however—as I learnt from the elderly bachelor, her master—she sent for a clergyman from the town; and being completely lucid in her supreme moments, she made to him some revelation The name of this clergyman was Hodgson; and I knew him well by repute. I sped off into the town to inquire for him: but I was destined to experience another disappointment. He had fallen into difficulties, and to avoid a debtor's prison, he had fled. I hastened up to London in the hope that he might possibly have sought me, if the old woman's revelation regarded me:—and how could it do otherwise, inasmuch as it must indubitably relate to

the lost Agnes? Yes—I learnt that about three weeks previously a person answering Hodgson's description, but who gave no name, had called at this mansion; and on learning that I was absent—no one knowing where I was, nor when it was likely I should return—he had gone away with looks of evident disappointment. I sought for him all over London: I advertised in the newspapers—I employed numerous active agents to prosecute the search—but all in vain. General Ruthven, I have no more to say: my tale is told; and you may now estimate the value which I set upon that tress of auburn hair—the only memorial of my loved and lost Agnes. Can you wonder that I registered a vow in heaven to abstain from contracting another alliance—and that for years I clung to the hope of obtaining some clue to the fate of my lost wife? Or can you wonder that when this hope died within me I plunged headlong into pleasure for the purpose of diverting my wretched thoughts as much as possible from the contemplation of that one episode of my life, which, as I described it at the outset, was both the brightest and the saddest that human experience could possibly know!"

The Earl of Normanton ceased speaking: General Ruthven took his hand, and pressed it—but said nothing. He could offer no sympathy—there was no room nor scope for it: and as for comment upon a tale of such deep tragic sadness—it would only have aggravated the feeling of anguish which the Earl experienced while narrating it.

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CHAPTER XXXV.

THE APPOINTMENT.

Punctually at eight o'clock in the evening, the Earl of Normanton alighted from his carriage at the door of the house in which Wilfrid Middleton lodged. His lordship was conducted up-stairs to a sitting apartment, where he found Wilfrid alone, as indeed he had expected from the confidential tenour of the note soliciting this visit. The Earl had not the slightest conception of what nature the important business could be: but he was calm and collected as usual—without exhibiting the faintest degree of excited curiosity. His countenance was however paler than was even its wont: for his feelings had been tensely wrung by the narrative which, under one of those unaccountable influences that occasionally seize upon the human mind, he had poured forth to the ears of General Ruthven.

Wilfrid Middleton welcomed the Earl, and requested him to be seated. He offered wine—but his lordship refused: he was in no mood, after having thought so long and so painfully of his lost Agnes that day, to do aught that might seem a desecration of her memory.

"You are doubtless astonished, my lord," began Middleton, assuming a very serious tone, "that I should have taken the liberty to request you to visit me here at my humble abode, instead of waiting upon your lordship, as might have seemed more decorous on my part——"

"No apology is requisite, Mr. Middleton," interrupted the Earl. "Your letter informed me that you had to speak upon business of

importance; and this being the case, you had a perfect right to desire my attendance. I am prepared to listen."

"The duty I have to perform," resumed Wilfrid, his voice now assuming accents of mournfulness as they appeared to the Earl, but of contrition as they seemed to Francis Pelham, who was a concealed listener in the adjoining room—"is a most painful one; and your lordship will bear with me if I only approach it by degrees, instead of at once giving utterance to the whole truth. There is an individual of your lordship's acquaintance—an individual whom you have been disposed to honour with your friendship, whom you have received at your table, and whom you doubtless consider to be an upright and well-principled man—— But, alas! your lordship is deeply deceived; and he of whom I speak is utterly unworthy of your confidence, your regard, and your frienship."

"To whom you can possibly allude, Mr. Middleton?" inquired the Earl, becoming interested in the topic.

"I have besought your lordship to bear with me somewhat," continued Wilfrid: "for I can assure you that never was task more unpleasant than that which circumstances have compelled me to perform. The individual to whom I allude, and whose name I shall have presently to mention with feelings that your lordship will full well appreciate, is one whom you would little suspect to be guilty of the deep villany which has rendered this explanation necessary. Reduced to the most dsperate shifts, he bethought himself of taking advantage of your lordship's attachment to play——"

"Do not misunderstand me, Mr. Middleton," interrupted the Earl, gravely. "I am not attached to play—I could abandon it at any moment, if I thought fit: it is to me a mere recreation——But proceed. What of this individual to whom you are alluding?"

"I was about to state," continued Wilfrid, "that he of whom I speak, having run through all his available resources, and desperately clinging to the hope of being enabled to maintain a position, which, ruined and bankrupt as he really finds himself, can only be regarded as a mere fictitious one,—this individual, I say, hit upon the villanous expedient of rendering your lordship his victim at play. Yet before I continue, I would for certain reasons entreat on his behalf your lordship's mercy—I would plead for him as if pleading for myself in similar circumstances— I would conjure your lordship to abstain from overwhelming him with the scandal of exposure——"

"Excuse me, Mr. Middleton," interrupted the Earl, with the least tinge of impatience; "but you are indeed advancing by a somewhat circuitous route towards the final revelation. Besides, it is somewhat unusual to plead thus beforehand on behalf of one whose name is yet unspoken and the precise nature of whose delinquency is as yet unsaid."

"Nevertheless, your lordship must bear with me," rejoined Wilfrid "for it is by no means easy to come to the point in so delicate a manner, as you yourself will admit when the

final revelation shall be made. The person of whom I am speaking, bethought himself, as I have already said, to render your lordship his victim at play: he saw that you were no coward in staking your gold, and that you were not daunted by a vein of ill luck. Of this he fancied he might take advantage, and replenish his own empty purse at your lordship's expense. Confident of being enabled to find an opportunity thus to plunder your lordship, from the circumstance that he enjoyed the honour of your acquaintance—and being well versed in all the iniquities of the gambling-table—he procured a set of fraudulent dice—loaded ones ——"

"Ah!" ejaculated the Earl: "this does indeed become serious:"—and for a moment he looked very hard at Middleton—not perhaps exactly with a visible air of suspicion—but still as if he sought to fathom at a glance all which yet remained unrevealed, and which was harboured in Middleton's breast.

"This individual of whom I am speaking," continued Wilfrid, in that same voice the accents of which might be interpreted either as an expression of sadness or of contrition, according to the ideas of the listeners,—"this individual, I say, broached his project to two persons, who, for some reason of his own, he thought might assist him, and whom he fancied to be willing to render such assistance. These men were none other than Ned Cranston and Captain O'Halloran."

"Indeed!" said the Earl, somewhat proudly. "But the persons whom you mention are not received at my house—although I may bestow upon them a nod of recognition at the gaming-table: for it is my idea that if men frequent such resorts, they are bound for the nonce to put off their patrician distinctions—or at least divest themselves of punctilious airs. This seems a strange tale which you are telling me, Mr. Middleton, inasmuch as I am at a loss to comprehend how the assistance of Mr. Cranston and Captain O'Halloran could in any way further the designs of an individual who is received at my table, and who is therefore in a position to engage me at play within the walls of my own house."

"Yes, my lord," responded Wilfrid: "but suppose that by accident the opportunity did not present itself at your own table—in that case the individual to whom I allude, proposed to cary out his nefarious plan at the ordinary gaming-rooms which you sometimes frequent: and there, with a number of lookers-on, he would have needed the assistance of confederates."

"I understand," answered the Earl. "Proceed. Surely you have now reached a point at which you can mention the name of this person?"

"And will your lordship show him mercy?" asked Middleton, with an air of concern.

"I can give no pledge," replied the Earl, "until acquainted with every detail. Much will necessarily depend upon circumstances; because they may be more or less aggravated in a variety of ways. For instance, the robbery may have only been contemplated, and not perpetrated: or it may have been pepetrated, and I

the while unconscious thereof. And yet," added Normanton, thoughtfully, "the mere contemplation of such a deed—entertained too by one who, as you tell me, has partaken of my hospitality—by one, moreover, who is so deeply designing that he seeks to enlist the confederacy of others—all these considerations render the crime so black that I am not sure but that I should be sinning grievously against society if I did not unmask and expose the villain without pity and without compunction. Therefore, Mr. Middleton, rely not too confidently upon mercy at my hands for this individual of whom you are speaking."

"And yet, my lord," I dare not stop short in my e xplanations," responded Wilfrid: "I must proceed. The guilt is great—the proofs are convincing——"

At this moment the door was thrown open—the domestic announcing, "Mr. Cranston and Captain O'Halloran."

"I presume," said the Earl, turning to Wilfrid, "that these gentlemen have come hither for the purpose of corroborating ——."

"Yes, my lord," cried Wilfrid, now speaking rapidly: "they are here to prove the truth of my assertions, and to assist in unmasking the villain. You can judge wherefore I pleaded for him——But no matter. Behold him!"

With those words—which, as we have stated, were uttered with the volubility of a great apparent excitement—Wilfrid Middleton tore open the door of the adjoining room; and the Earl of Normanton was smitten with consternation and dismay on perceiving Francis Pelham.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE EXAMINATION.

It will be observed that almost up to the very last instant Wilfrid had spoken as if he were speaking of himself; and Francis Pelham, concealed in the adjoining room, naturally imagined that Middleton was endeavouring to break the truth to the Earl as gently and delicately s possible. Therefore the moment that Wilfrid began speaking in that hasty and vehement manner which concluded with the denunciation of the young gentleman, the latter was seized with such a stupefaction of astonishment that on the door being thrown open in the manner just described, he appeared like one transfixed with a dismayed sense of the guilt with which he was charged.

"Seize upon him!" exclaimed Wilfrid, affecting to be violently excited: "the false dice are about his person!—let them be produced!"

Cranston and O'Halloran rushed towards Francis Pelham to execute Middleton's advice; but the young gentleman—stricken with a full sense of the matchless iniquity which had prepared this trap and which sought to turn the tables upon himself—regained his self-possession in a moment. Nothing could exceed the dignified indignation with which he drew himself up,—exclaiming, "Dare to touch me, ruffians—and ye shall bitterly repent it!"

"The blush of conscious guilt is upon his cheeks!" ejaculated Wilfrid, who was affecting to have lost all pity and compassion for the young man. "Seize upon him!—produce the evidence of his villany!"

Cranston and O'Halloran—who for an instant had stopped short, overawed by the dignified appearance of Francis Pelham—rushed towards him again: but the next moment O'Halloran lay sprawling upon the floor on one side, while the burly Ned Cranston was dashed violently against the open door of communication on the other hand.

"Here, my lord," said Francis Pelham, advancing towards the Earl, and speaking in a firm voice,—"here are the dice of which you have heard so much, I beg you to take them—and let this matter be sifted to the very bottom."

The Earl of Normanton's countenance was severe and cold—and for an instant he extended not his hand to take the dice: but as he looked steadfastly and searchingly upon Francis Pelham's features, and in the depths of his clear blue eyes beheld no expression of flinching, cowering, or wavering, he was staggered: his suspicions, hitherto fixed on one point, began to radiate elsewhere: and taking the dice, he said, "Yes—I will keep them until this matter be duly investigated."

"By Jove!" exclaimed Ned Cranston, assuming a most menacing look, "this young jackanapes shall suffer——"

"Silence!" interrupted the Earl sternly. "Let not another word be spoken! Mr. Middleton, I beg that you will not interrupt me:"—for Wilfrid was about to say something. "Captain O'Halloran, forbear from those threatening gestures! I am placed in the position of one who must discharge a very painful duty. Once for all, let not another word be spoken in this room until the investigation can be properly entered upon."

Having thus spoken, with the air of a man who was determined to be obeyed, the Earl of Normanton sat down at a side-table, on which there were writing materials; and he penned two notes. When they were written, he summoned a domestic of the house; and said, "Let these be taken at once to their respective addresses.

The servant received the notes and withdrew. When the door closed behind her, the Earl of Normanton looked slowly around, and said, "Gentlemen, I must continue to enjoin the strictest silence. There are two opposing parties here present:—on the one side is Mr. Pelham—on the other are you, Mr. Middleton, Mr. Cranston, and Captain O'Halloran. He who speaks after my injunction to the contrary, will only be prejudicing his own cause in my estimation. I have sent to request the attendance of two personages, before whom the statements on both sides shall be made."

The Earl ceased speaking; and Francis Pelham, with an air of conscious innocence, took a seat in silence. Yet inwardly he was the least thing troubled: for he knew that innocence does not invariably triumph; and he had already seen enough to convince him that the treachery of which it was sought to

make him a victim was well arranged and deep-laid. Cranston and O'Halloran exchanged for a moment significant looks, as if they did not exactly like the turn the affair was taking: but the next instant they resumed their wonted air of usual effrontery. It was the same with Wilfrid Middleton: he was for an instant disconcerted by the check which the vile plot was receiving—for he had hoped that it would prove so instantaneously overwhelming as to convince the Earl of Normanton beyond the faintest shadow of doubt, as well as to crush Francis Pelham by the weight of circumstantial evidence. Yet he quickly regained his habitual self-command: and he affected that ease of manner which seemed to betoken the most perfect confidence as to the result. Twenty minutes elapsed, during which a profound silence reigned throughout the room,—the Earl of Normanton maintaining a cold severe look, so that none could possibly conjecture as to the precise nature of the opinion which he had formed upon the subject.

In respect to Francis Pelham, it must be observed that he from time to time surveyed Cranston and O'Halloran with an expression of countenance which on each occasion that he thus gazed, grew more intense and scrutinizing. Of the two, however, it was Cranston who seemed more particularly to engross his attention. It will be remembered that when the precious couple were introduced to Wilfrid's apartment in the afternoon, the few words which Cranston spoke had made a certain degree of impression upon Pelham:—now he had just heard him speak again—but only a few words, as on the former occasion; and yet these few words, or rather the tone of voice in which they were uttered, kept floating in Pelham's brain. He had not as yet heard O'Halloran speak at all—neither in the afternoon nor on this present occasion; and therefore it might be that from this circumstance he surveyed him with a little less attention than that which he bestowed upon Cranston. The two individuals themselves thought it better became the air of confident effrontery, which they assumed to look straightforward, and neither glance to the right nor to the left; and thus they did not perceive that Pelham occasionally surveyed them in the manner which we have described.

At the expiration of about twenty minutes, the door was thrown open; and the servant of the house announced Sir Harcourt Topham. This gentleman was the chief magistrate of Bow Street, and was renowned for his skill in sifting evidence, as well as for his impartial love of justice. He was an intimate friend of the Earl of Normanton; and as he lived in the neighbourhood of his own police-court, had not for an instant hesitated to obey the Earl's summons to Wilfrid Middleton's lodgings. It was by no means an unusual thing in those days for London magistrates to hear cases at their own houses, before or after the usual hours of attendance at Bow Street—or even to visit other places for the same purpose. They carried their authority and jurisdiction with them, and could exercise both anywhere within their own county,—thus combining the attributes of stipendiary magis-

trate and unpaid justice-of-the peace.

When Sir Hrcourt Topham was announced, both Cranston and O'Halloran started uneasily—but yet in a manner which was barely perceptible. Wilfrid felt his cheek blanching: but the interval occupied in stooping to pick up his pocket-handkerchief, was sufficient for the recovery of an outward display of self-possession:—while Francis Pelham, with the true feeling of innocence, experienced a thrill of satisfaction at the idea of the case being thoroughly sifted by so competent an investigator. The Earl of Normanton shook the magistrate by the hand, and apologized for having drawn him away from his home at such an hour in the evening.

"It is of no other consequence than this," replied Sir Harcourt Topham,—"that I had appointed nine o'clock to receive an information from a gentleman who has a complaint to make; and I have been compelled to leave my clerk to officiate in my absence. However, I have taken the liberty of bidding my clerk follow me hither presently, in case there should be warrants to issue on account of the information which is to be laid by the gentleman to whom I have alluded."

"As this is my abode, Sir Harcourt," said Wilfrid Middleton, "I can assure your worship that you are heartily welcome to receive your clerk here."

The magistrate bowed—and then looked slowly around the room to observe who else were present. He recognised Cranston and O'Halloran, who had on two or three occasions figured in his presence for drunken frolics and street rows: but as they were held to be venial offences, and were expatiated by fines paid at the time, his recognition of them was accompanied by a sort of half-smile—to which they both responded by low bows. Pelham was a complete stranger to the magistrate, whose eyes settled upon him for merely an instant; and then, having seated himself at the head of the table, he glanced towards the Earl of Normanton, by way of intimating that he was ready to enter upon the business for which his presence was required. The nobleman produced the loaded dice, which he deposited upon the table; and then said, "I think, Sir Harcourt, that it will be better if Mr. Middleton were to begin by recapitulating to you those circumstances and accusations which he has already mentioned to me."

Wilfrid was fully prepared for this course; and it was therefore in a firm voice, and with an outward appearance of the most perfect composure, that he entered upon his narrative. We need not reiterate the allegations he advanced:—suffice it to say that they were conveyed with that same specious air of truthfulness which he had previously adopted towards the Earl of Normanton, and which he so well knew how to maintain.

"If I pleaded so hard," he added, "in this young man's behalf—and if I even descended to entreaty that the Earl would show mercy towards him—it was because I could not forget that on one occasion he rendered me a signal service—perhaps to the extent of saving my life—at all

events preventing me from being despoiled of a considerable sum of money."

But as Wilfrid thus spoke, he was careful to avoid looking towards Cranston and O'Halloran, whom he knew to be the perpetrators of the very outrage to which he alluded: while these individuals themselves preserved an air of the most unruffled tranquillity. The demeanour of Francis Pelham, while Wilfrid was stating his case, was that of a lofty indignation which only restrained itself by reason of the consciousness that the moment for counter-statement and self-vindication was not far distant.

"You have omitted to explain, Mr. Middleton," said the magistrate, how it happened that the accused Mr. Pelham should be in an adjoining room at the moment when the Earl of Normanton visited you according to the appointment given in your note to his lordship."

"I was coming to this concluding circumstance," answered Wilfrid. "I have already stated that the accused Francis Pelham broached his nefarious plan to Mr. Cranston and Captain O'Halloran, to whom he furthermore declared that he had ordered a particular set of dice to be fashioned for the carrying out of his purpose. Mr. Cranston and Captain O'Halloran were naturally shocked at the proposal: but they veiled their feelings, and affected to a certain degree to fall into it, that they might the better frustrate and unmask the iniquity. Not being intimate with the Earl of Normanton, they addressed themselves to me for advice. I felt that the matter was a difficult as well as a delicate one, and that so grave an accusation should not be made against the character of an individual, unless supported by the most unerring proofs. I likewise felt that I was under an obligation to Mr. Pelham for the service to which I have already alluded: but I equally owed a duty under the circumstances, to my friend, the Earl of Normanton. I was therefore anxious that while on the one hand the iniquitous intent should be baffled and exposed,—yet that Francis Pelham should be treated with leniency on the other hand. Accordingly I hit upon a device which I hoped would answer this double purpose. I bade Mr. Cranston and Captain O'Halloran seek Pelham at once—appear to fall completely into his views——at the same time telling him that it would be necessary to let another person into the project, and this person was myself. Francis Pelham, knowing that I had the honour of enjoying the Earl's intimacy, snapped at the bait thus held out; and it was agreed that he should call upon me this evening about a quarter to eight to talk over the matter and to show me how the loaded dice were to be used. This arrangement being settled, I wrote to the Earl, requesting him to come at eight. Francis Pelham arrived a little before that hour; and when I heard footsteps ascending the stairs, I affected to be alarmed,—hastily whispering, 'This is the Earl himself, who is paying me a visit! We had better not be seen together; it may possibly excite suspicion; he will not remain long: hide yourself in the adjacent room!'—The rest is

known to your worship; and I have no more to say."

It was with great difficulty that Francis Pelham had been enabled to keep back an outburst of indignation as Wilfrid thus told a tale which was invested with so specious an appearance of truth Cranston and O'Halloran chuckled inwardly,—feeling confident that their intended victim must be completely overwhelmed—and likewise admiring the consummate address of their hypocritical accomplice. The Earl of Normanton looked coldly and severely suspicious at Francis Pelham: but the magistrate—more accustomed to reserve his own judgment until he had heard both sides of the case—afforded by his countenance no clue to the reading of whatsoever opinion he himself might already entertain.

"As a matter of course," he said, "Mr Cranston and Captain O'Halloran are here to corroborate your statement, Mr. Middleton?"

"They are, your worship," was Wilfrid's response.

"It's every word true!" exclaimed Ned Cranston: "or I'll eat my own head! Isn't it every word true, O'Halloran?"

"Every word!" replied the Captain, emphatically.

Pelham started on thus hearing the sound of O'Halloran's voice for the first time: he gazed intently upon him—then he seemed ready to give utterance to something vehement: but as if seized with a bewildering uncertainty and doubt, he sank back in the chair from which he had half-risen—and passed his hand slowly and dubiously across his forehead.

"It will be unnecessary to question Mr. Cranston or Captain O'Halloran with regard to details, at least for the present," said the magistrate; "and therefore, Mr. Pelham, you had better at once proceed with whatsoever defence you may have to offer."

"But I thought," said Wilfrid Middleton in an undertone to the Earl of Normanton, "that your lordship expected the presence of two gentlemen?"

"I certainly could have wished that the other had been here," replied the Earl, "on account of the interest which he has hitherto taken in Francis Pelham. But I suppose that he could not have been at home when my note was delivered. After all," added the nobleman, who was likewise speaking in an under-tone, "the presence of the magistrate was sufficient—and therefore I suffered the proceedings to commence."

Wilfrid sought in the Earl's look, manner, and voice, for some positive intimation that he was as friendly towards himself as ever, and that therefore his suspicions pointed entirely against Francis Pelham. This latter was indeed the case with the Earl: but still they were only suspicions which he entertained—they had not amounted to a positive conviction, notwithstanding the terrific pressure of circumstantial evidence against the accused young gentleman. Amidst those suspicions, painfully strong though they were, there was nevertheless a slight under-current of undefinable doubt—a vague and dreamy idea that matters might not after all

stand precisely as they had been represented;—and at all events the Earl was more poignantly anxious to hear what Pelham had to say in his defence, than he chose to exhibit by his looks. The result of all this was that he could not divest himself of a certain distant coldness and guarded reserve while answering Wilfrid's question in respect to the second individual who had been expected.

"I presume," said Middleton, after a pause," that the personage to whom your lordship alluded——"

But before he had time to finish the sentence the door opened—and General Ruthven was announced.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE RESULT.

The Earl of Normanton's note had merely requested the immediate presence of General Ruthven at Mr. Middleton's lodgings on very urgent business—but without specifying what the nature of the business was. In order, however, that the veteran should not come totally unprepared for the intelligence he was destined to receive, the Earl had intimated in a single line that it most seriously concerned Francis Pelham. Ruthven, as already stated, had acquired in camps the habit of keeping his emotions under discipline on nearly all occasions: but in the present instance he failed to exercise the power of self-control. He entered, therefore, with alarm and agitation depicted upon his countenance: and sweeping his eyes around, was astonished at beholding such a conclave. Ned Cranston and the Captain were unknown to him: but it appeared that he was not equally a stranger to them—for at the instant of his appearance they exchanged rapid glances, the meaning of which could only be understood by themselves. The General was acquainted with Sir Harcourt Topham, with whom he hastily shook hands: he bowed to Middleton: and he nodded with affectionate friendliness to Francis—to whose cheeks the honest blush rose up at the bare idea of being for an instant considered unworthy of that almost paternal regard. But the General was too much excited to notice Pelham's crimsoning countenance; and turning to Lord Normanton, he hastily sought explanations. These were soon given: and the General listened to the tale with a degree of indignation which he could scarcely restrain until it was finished. But then he broke forth.

"I would stake all I am worth," he vehemently ejaculated, "fortune—rank—honour—aye, even *life*, on this young man's innocence! Give me your hand, Francis! You are wronged—you are outraged—I know you are! Good heavens! I can read guiltlessness in that very blush which glows upon your cheek! Yes, and those tears too—they are not shed by the eyes of a hypocrite!"

The scene was an affecting one for those who had feelings to appreciate it: the magistrate remained unmoved to all outward appearance, though he was in reality touched inwardly: the Earl of Normanton was profoundly moved—but he endeavoured to look severe. As for Middleton, Cranston, and O'Halloran,—they as a matter of course remained totally unsusceptible of the pathos of the

scene: but they were agitated with fears lest the tables should be turned against them. Meanwhile Francis had taken the General's proffered hand; and unable to speak through the depth of his emotions, he pressed that hand to his lips, moistering it with his tears.

"I tell you he is innocent!" reiterated the General, his voice now tremulous with the feelings which were stirred in his breast: "there is some foul wrong here!"

"General Ruthven," ejaculated Middleton, starting from his seat with an indignant air, "you have heard, sir, that circumstances have rendered me his accuser—you have been told likewise that I pleaded hard for him; it is therefore as ungentlemanly as it is ungenerous on your part to throw out an aspersion against me."

"I beg that I may be listened to," interposed Sir Harcourt Topham with that habit of magisterial authority which at once made itself felt. "Resume your seat, Mr. Middleton—pray sit down, General Ruthven. Mr. Pelham, you have now the opportunity of speaking in your own defence."

Wilfrid Middleton and General Ruthven both at once obeyed the magistrate's directions in respect to being seated; while Francis Pelham, dashing away his tears—resuming his look of conscious innocence—and regaining all his self-possession, prepared to enter upon his explanations. He spoke firmly and in a straightforward candid manner. He commenced by stating that so far from being reduced to pecuniary necessities, he possessed an income of four hundred pounds a-year, paid to him through the hands of a highly-respectable solicitor: he repudiated the idea that he had ever gambled in his life, or that he was extravagant or dissipated. He then proceeded to explain how he had observed Wilfrid Middleton substitute one set of dice for another at the Earl of Normanton's country-house on the preceding evening—but declared that it produced no particular impression on his mind until he had heard his lordship casually mention at General Ruthven's the circumstance of having lost three thousand guineas. He went on to observe that there were reasons wherefore he had wished to spare Wilfrid the hopeless ruin which must result from public exposure; and that while he was determined on the one hand to see restitution made to the Earl, yet that on the other hand he was desirous so to manage the proceeding that Wilfrid should have an opportunity of throwing himself on his lordship's mercy. Hence, he said, his own concealment in the adjacent room at the time when the Earl was expected. He also explained the motive which had induced him to keep possession of the loaded dice, with a view to their ultimate destruction.

"As for these two persons," added Francis Pelham, looking slowly round with blighting scorn and contempt upon Cranston and O'Halloran, "I need only breathe a single word of indignant denial of their false statements!"

He was about to say something more—when Wilfrid, who throughout Pelham's narrative had affected to be a prey to an indignant rage

which could scarcely control itself, thought it better to seem as if the ebullition could be no longer kept back; and starting up from his chair, he vomited forth the most vehement denials of all the young man's statements.

"Sit down, sir—and be silent!" said the magistrate sternly. "A good cause needs not to be pleaded by such passion as this: and besides, Mr. Pelham interrupted you not while you were telling your own story."

"But does your worship think I can sit here patiently," exclaimed Wilfrid, "when I hear my character thus infamously aspersed——"

"I now command you to be silent," interrupted the magistrate, with a look and tone that overawed Middleton.

"I knew he was innocent—I told you he was!" whispered the General to Normanton: and the tears ran down the veteran's countenance. "You say nothing my lord——and yet you are moved——"

"Hush, my dear General!" responded the Earl in an under-tone—but his voice was tremulous: "let us leave the matter in the hands of him who is so ably investigating it."

"Mr. Pelham," said the magistrate, "have you anything to add in your defence?"

"I was about to say something, your worship," responded Pelham, reflectingly, as he looked towards Cranston and O'Halloran; but as I have no certitude——No!" he ejaculated, abruptly interrupting himself: "I have nothing more to say."

"Perhaps Mr. Pelham will inform us," said Wilfrid, maliciously, "from what source he obtains his income of four hundred a-year?"

"I decline to answer that question," responded the young gentleman.

"At all events he will inform us," added Wilfrid, hastily, "who is the respectable solicitor that pays him this income?"

"There again I must refuse to be questioned," rejoined Francis.

"You reserve on these points," remarked the magistrate, "is not in your favour."

The General looked distressed; and the Earl of Normanton recovered all his cold severity: while Cranston and O'Halloran thought that things were looking up in favour of their side. At the same moment, certain ideas, rapid as lightning, were gushing, through Wilfrid's brain.

"He dares not speak of my antecedents, even if he be in possession of all those secrets!—he is afraid that I should retalliate by telling whatsoever I know of himself! We are at least equal upon that ground——or rather it would seem that it is a ground on which he will not meet me in combat. My own position is desperate——I will dare a single question——it may clinch everything!"

Having arrived at this conclusion, Middleton said, addressing himself to the young gentleman, "Perhaps you will tell us how long you have borne the name of Francis Pelham?"

"I can have no hesitation in at once admitting," was the calm res-

ponse, "that it is not the name by which I have always been known."

Middleton threw himself back in his chair with the look of one who felt that his own cause was triumphant: General Ruthven was painfully distressed, but still not a whit staggered in his confidence in Pelham's rectitude: the Earl was still all cold severity: Cranston and O'Halloran again chuckled inwardly—and they even felt that their cause was safe when the magistrate said, "Mr. Pelham, you have seriously injured yourself by refusing to answer Mr. Middleton's questions."

"Excuse me, Sir Harcourt," exclaimed General Ruthven; "but I cannot see how a refusal to explain private affairs can lead you to this opinion. Mr. Pelham has frankly and candidly avowed to me that there are circumstances——"

"A good cause, General," interrupted Middleton, with cutting sarcasm, "requires not to be pleaded with passion. His worship reminded us of that aphorism just now."

"It is true," observed Sir Harcourt Topham: "and I will explain to you, General Ruthven, why I consider that Mr. Pelham has injured his cause—and most materially so—by his refusal to answer Mr. Middleton's question. At the very basis of the accusation against him lies the averment that he is without funds—that his resources are exhausted—and that he is in a desperate position. If this be the case, there is at once a motive shown for his alleged design on the Earl of Normanton's purse. But if, on the other hand, he would give an account of himself—prove that he is in possession of four hundred a-year—and that his affairs are in the hands of a respectable solicitor, it would tell this much in his favour,—that we should at least consider the two statements to be equally balanced, and we should proceed to sift the evidence in order to arrive at a conclusion."

At this moment the door opened, and the servant of the house entered. Handing Sir Harcourt Topham a sealed packet, she said, "If you please, sir, two constables are waiting below until you have leisure to sign the warrants contained in this envelope,—when they will proceed to execute them."

"Bid the constables wait a few minutes," answered the magistrate, placing the packet unopened upon the table before him. "I have not immediate leisure to sign the warrants which my clerk has drawn up."

The domestic retired; and all present understood why Sir Harcourt Topham had directed tuat the constable should wait, although he had not expressed the reason. His worship evidently foresaw that those officials would have a duty to perform as to the result of the present investigation; and, according to the present aspect of the proceedings, it appeared but too probable that Francis Pelham would be given into custody. There was a deep silence for a few moments after the servant had withdrawn: but it was speedily broken by General Ruthven, who exclaimed, "Come, my dear Francis, you must speak out—indeed, indeed you must! Cast all punctilio aside—

reveal those circumstances which you have hitherto hidden from even me, your best friend! Speak, I conjure you!"

But Francis only shook his head, and remained silent.

"Good heavens, my dear boy!" cried the General, now most excruciatingly distressed: "is it possible you are so indifferent to your own welfare? No, no—it cannot be! Have you nothing to say?"

And Pelham in a firm but mournful voice answered, "Nothing."

General Ruthven, who had half started from his seat, sank back like one completely crushed and overpowered; and Lord Normanton in a voice tremulous with emotion, whispered in the General's ear, "I know not why—but I would give half my fortune that things had taken another turn!"

"I presume," said Wilfrid, "that your lordship is now satisfied?"

"By Jove, how can Sir Harcourt be otherwise?" ejaculated Ned Cranston in his huge rough voice. "Can his worship be otherwise, O'Halloran?"

"Impossible, Ned!" responded the Captain, who, as well as his companion, was suddenly carried away by a triumphant joy from that rigid and prudential silence which they had hitherto maintained since General Ruthven had first entered the room.

They did not therefore perceive that the General had started on hearing Cranston's voice—or that he was seized with a still greater excitement by the sound of O'Halloran's; and now he suddenly sprang up to his feet, gazing upon those two men with a vague uncertainty.

"Ah! then they *are* the same"! ejaculated Pelham, likewise springing from his chair. "I all along thought so——I feared to say it——but now I am convinced! Villains, ye are the highwaymen——"

"You lie!" thundered Cranston, in a voice which made every thing shake and quiver in the room.

Meanwhile, just before this startling scene took place, Sir Harcourt Topham had opened the sealed packet, and had looked at the warrants which it enclosed.

"Ha!" he ejaculated, strangely excited: then, in an authoritative tone, he said, "I command you all to be quiet! Silence, this instant! Leave me to decide. Constables, come up!" he added, hastening to the door and opening it.

There was an instant's pause within that room, during which the sounds of hasty footsteps were heard ascending the stairs—and during which, too, Cranston and O'Halloran exchanged rapid looks of dismay. But all in a moment their mood changed; and they began to bluster, and bully, and talk ferociously.

"Silence!" exclaimed the magistrate: and the ruffians were overawed. "Constables, do your duty!"

The officers of justice, who entered at the moment, seized upon Cranston and O'Halloran; and the magistrate said, as he signed the warrants. "You are arrested in pursuance of an information laid against you for a ferocious attack upon Mr. Thomas Hamer."

"Then, by Jove!" exclaimed Ned Cranston, with a horrid imprecation, "it's all up and we're done for! If it hadn't been for that cursed fool

Middleton in refusing to divide the Earl's three thousand guineas, we should have been far away on our road to Scotland.

"My dear boy, your innocence is proved!" exclaimed General Ruthven, rushing forward and straining Francis to his breast.

"Mr. Pelham——my dear Pelham," said the Earl of Normanton, in a voice full of emotion which he sought not to control; "a thousand, thousand congratulations!"

"Constable," said Sir Harcourt Topham, "take Wilfrid Middleton into custody likewise!"

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

MRS. ST. GEORGE AGAIN.

The reader will remember that on shifting the scene from Apsley Court to the British metropolis, we left May Middleton at the time when she had heard from the lips of Mrs. St. George the intelligence of Reuben Wallis's death. We have seen how deeply afflicted was our fair heroine, and how she and her father mingled their tears together when the sad tale was communicated to the latter. For the two following days Miss Middleton did not cross the threshold of Apsley Court—nor scarcely leave her own chamber: but on the third day Mrs. St. George paid her a visit—and May endeavoured to rally her spirits somewhat, inasmuch as she did not choose to betray to her friend how profoundly she continued to feel the tidings just alluded to, for fear lest Mrs. St. George should recur to the topic and question her thereupon. Perhaps if this lady had been one whose disposition was calculated to win our heroine's completest esteem, without the slightest drawback, or without any of those vague and undefined feelings which the young damsel experienced when she caught his sudden flashing of Mrs. St. George's large dark eyes,—she would have felt soothed and consoled to making her a confidant in respect to everything which had occurred between herself and Reuben Wallis: but this confidence May felt she could *not* impart to the tenant of Woodbine College.

They walked forth together in the grounds: for May, as already said, had not stirred out for a couple of days—and she felt the necessity of the fresh air. For some time the conversation progressed on indifferent topics: but every instant our heroine experienced a kind of apprehension lest her companion should refer to the one which she was too anxious to avoid. Thus, so far from being enabled to appear gay and cheerful, Miss Middleton seemed frequently pre-occupied or embarrassed; and Mrs. St. George at length said, "My sweet young friend, you have not regained the equipoise of your spirits after the sad intelligence into the communication of which I was so inadvertently led.

"It cannot be difficult for you to understand," remarked May, "that the tidings to which you allude were but too well calculated to afflict my father and myself; for he whose death you announced had been reared with me from my infancy. Indeed, he was an inmate of Burnside; and adopted, so to speak, by my parents at the time that I first saw the light!"

"And of course you loved him very much?" said Mrs. St. George.

May could not help gazing upon her with an undefined feeling that was not altogether one of astonishment, but appeared to be blended with that sort of vague uneasiness which amounts almost to a suspicion of some sinister and unfathomable purpose on the part of another, for Mrs. St. George had put that very same question on the occasion when she told the tale of Reuben's death.

"Yet why," thought May to herself, "should I feel as if this lady's conduct was strange, or that she has any ulterior purpose in putting the question a second time? After all, it seems a natural one, and may be dictated by the most friendly and sympathizing spirit."

May however gave no audible response: but having withdrawn her looks from Mrs. St. George's countenance, she walked on ilent and pensive.

"You know the deep interest I feel in you, my sweet friend," resumed the lady after a pause: "and you must not therefore be surprised—much less offended—if I speak to you on subjects which concern you most nearly. Yes, May—I see that you did love Reuben Wallis: but surely it could only have been as a sister?"

"I think I told you that I loved him as a sister," answered May seriously, "when we were discoursing on the same topic the other day."

"Yes," observed Mrs. St. George, in the soft insinuating voice of one who with a friendly sympathy invites the fullest confidence: "but yet there is something in your manner which I cannot altogether comprehend—some feeling which you appear as if you would fain conceal from one whose only motive is to proffer the most disinterested friendship. Wherefore not unbosom yourself to me, dear May? Is it bashfulness that prevents you? If so, let me at once put you at your ease by informing you that I am not altogether unacquainted with the rumours which floated about this neighbourhood at the time——"

"What rumours?" asked May, with some slight degree of abruptness; and at the same time a blush mantled upon her beautiful countenance.

"I will speak candidly, my dear young friend," answered Mrs. St. George. "I have been told that your hand was sought by your cousin Wilfrid, and that there was a time when his suit was not altogether without favour in your eyes. If this were the case, how can I reconcile it with the idea that you cherished any other feeling than one of sisterly friendship towards Reuben Wallis? I know that you have twice assured me that such *was* the feeling you *did* cherish—that such, too, is the sentiment which inspires you now when you contemplate his image. But yet it seems——"

"My dear madam," interrupted May, her cheeks again suffused with blushes, and her tone tremulous with inward distress, "let us not dwell upon the topic. There are secrets——" And then she suddenly checked herself.

"I comprehend you, Miss Middleton," said Mrs. St. George, in a somewhat cold tone: "there are

secrets which can only be imparted to one whose friendship is of long standing, and which has consequently been tried; but, such, it appears, is not the footing upon which I can venture to place myself—although Heaven knows that never was friendship more sincere than that which I experience for you!"

"My dear madam—my dear Mrs. St. George," exclaimed our heroine taking the lady's hand and pressing it warmly, "do not—do not, I beseech you, consider me ungrateful or indifferent!"

"No—I was wrong to entertain even the most transient suspicion of coldness on your part: and I repeat that if I question you on these topics, my dearest May, it is only because I think that a young lady, situated as you are—without any female relatives near you to afford advice or consolation—may possibly need both. Now, suffer me to penetrate, if I can into the real state of your feelings; and you shall see whether my own worldly experiences and my own power of reading the human heart, fit me for the office of adviser. You *did* love Wilfrid Middleton—deeply, deeply—but his conduct was not altogether such as could merit your good opinion: you have since endeavoured to discard his image from your mind; and in order to help and strengthen yourself in that which you consider to be a bounden duty, you have endeavoured to revert your thoughts and to settle them completely upon Reuben Wallis. But now you have learnt that he is no more: and there is a voice within you the whispering of which you cannot stifle—a voice which tells you that Wilfrid is still an object of interest—still dear perhaps——"

"No, Mrs. St. George!" interrupted May firmly, and even drawing herself up with dignity, as she suddenly stopped short to give the answer: "Mr. Wilfrid Middleton has no longer the slightest hold upon my esteem or respect;—and where those feelings exist not, there can be no love."

"One word more, my dear young friend," said Mrs. St. George, "and we will quit the topic."

"But why even a single word more?" inquired May, somewhat impatiently.

"Merely," responded her friend of Woodbine Cottage, "that I may ascertain your real feelings: because, inexperienced as you are, you may misapprehend and mistake them—thought not wilfully—on the contrary in the very extreme of your innocence: whereas I, with a larger experience of the world, and judging more dipassionately, may perchance read them aright. Let me put a case. Suppose that Mr. Wilfrid Middleton so thoroughly reforms his conduct—and inspired by his love for you——"

"Mrs. St. George," interrupted May, with a dignified peremptoriness, and with a flush glowing upon her cheeks, "I can positively hear no more! I must beg of you to abandon this topic at once. I give you credit for the best of motives: but I appeal to that friendship which you have proffered me, and which I accept—I appeal to it, I repeat, that you will spare me any further agitation of feeling. You know not all Wilfrid Middleton's conduct: family secrets

are involved therein; and there is consequently no breach of friendship in withholding them from you. But in your ignorance of these matters, *you* cannot be in a position to judge of the case; and as for advice, *mine* on the other hand is not a position which renders it needful."

Mrs. St. George dared not pursue the subject after May had thus addressed her: for a few moments she appeared to be slightly annoyed: but Farmer Middleton almost immediately afterwards joining them in their ramble, the discourse was turned upon other topics.

When Mrs. St. George took her leave and returned to her own dwelling, May withdrew to her chamber to reflect upon the scene which we have been describing: for it was fraught with a certain vague suspicion which haunted her, and the nature of which she could not well define. It seemed, however, as if Mrs. St. George had some ulterior object in questioning her, and also as if she were not altogether sincere in her assurance that she was actuated by disinterested friendship only. Yet what earthly reason could she have for pleading the cause of Wilfrid Middleton?—for May could not help feeling that she *was* about to plead it when putting forward a case which supposed his complete reformation. Our heroine was bewildered: she knew not at what conclusion to arrive: but very certain it is that the result of the scene was not to render Mrs. St. George more estimable in her eyes, nor to divest her own mind of those unaccountable feelings which repelled, as it were, a full and complete confidence in respect to that lady.

A few days after the incident we have been describing—and when May was seated at breakfast with her father one morning—the postman from the neighbouring village delivered a letter at Apsley Court. It was addressed to Mr. Middleton, and bore the London post-mark. The farmer at once recognised the handwriting of Mr. Johnson, the solicitor: and on opening the letter, his countenance speedily showed that it contained evil intelligence. May watched her father with an increasing anxiety, as his own features betrayed an increasing trouble.

"It regards Wilfrid," said Mr. Middleton, at length; "and the unhappy young man has put the crowning stone upon the fabric of his misdeeds. How vain was it that we sought to save him from exposure for his guilt here, when he goes and brands himself with indelible shame elsewhere!"

"What has he done, father?" inquired May, greatly agitated: "what new wickedness or folly has he committed?"

"I will read you Mr. Johnson's letter," replied the farmer. "But no!—I will explain to you its contents. In a word, dear girl, your cousin Wilfrid—my nephew—the unworthy son of my deceased eldest brother—is the inmate of a gaol, accused of having cheated some great nobleman out of a large sum of money."

"And he who but a few months back received a legacy of five thousand pounds!" cried May. "Oh, he must be inveterately bad!"—and then for an instant she shuddered as she thought of the precipice on which she had stood when bestowing her

love on so unworthy an object: but the next moment she experienced a feeling of deep thankfulness to heaven for having opened her eyes, through the agency of her deceased uncle, to the infamy of her cousin's character.

"It is but too true," continued her father, referring to the letter as he spoke, "that the honourable name of Middleton is thus disgraced through that young man. His conduct has been infamous. Having succeeded in winning, by means of false dice, the sum of three thousand guineas from the Earl of Normanton, he barely endeavoured to ruin an innocent young gentleman who had detected the fraud. This young gentleman—whose name, it seems, is Francis Pelham—was on the very point of falling beneath the weight of the circumstantial evidence which Wilfrid with a devilish cunning had accumulated against him, when the entire iniquity was exposed. In a word, May, my wretched nephew is unredeemably ruined: for not only has he been unmasked as a base black-leg, but likewise proved to have been the associate of a couple of scoundrels against whom rest the gravest capital charges."

"Good heavens!" cried May, "what degradation! what infamy! Can nothing be done for my unhappy cousin? Oh, do not for a moment think, my dear father——".

"No, no, my dear child," hastily exclaimed Mr. Middleton; "I comprehend full well that it is naught but the most generous feeling on your part. But his guilt is of so black a nature it were almost sinful to bestow compassion upon him. The idea that he should have sought to ruin a young man, who, as Mr. Johnson declares in his letter, is the very soul of integrity and honour! But the lawyer's communication furnishes a few details which I have not yet mentioned to you. It seems that some time ago the carriage of a certain General Ruthven was waylaid and stopped by a couple of robbers on Hounslow Heath. It was faring ill with the veteran in the hands of the masked highwaymen, when a traveller on horseback came to his assistance. This was the young gentleman, Francis Pelham. The highwaymen were captured and sent in the carriage to Hounslow, strongly bound with cords, and in the care of the General's valet. The General himself was much hurt, and was taken to the nearest wayside public-house—his youthful deliverer remaining with him to minister such attentions as might be requisite under the circumstances. The highwaymen escaped from the place of confinement at Hounslow; and thus it happened that neither the General nor Francis Pelham once caught a glimpse of their countenances. But heaven did not choose to leave them long in the enjoyment of impunity: for these two very men became the accomplices of Wilfrid Middleton in the nefarious scheme whereby the Earl of Normanton was plundered; and the voices of the highwaymen betrayed them to the General and Mr. Pelham at a magisterial investigation which was instituted at Wilfrid's own lodgings with respect to the dice-cheating case. Mr. Johnson's letter gives full details: but I have told you enough,

my dear May, to furnish you with an idea of your wretched cousin's guilt, and of the providential manner in which it was brought to light, so that an innocent young man escaped the ruin wherein it was sought to plunge him."

May preserved a long silence during which she reflected most sadly; and at length she said to her father, "What will you do in this case? or is there indeed anything to be done?"

"There is nothing for us to do, my dear child," responded Farmer Middleton; "for it appears that Francis Pelham has most generously interested himself with the Earl of Normanton in reference to Wilfrid—a degree of sympathy which my graceless nephew so little deserves and which is all the more magnanimous when displayed by the very one whom he sought to ruin. A prosecution before a public tribunal cannot, however, be avoided under all the circumstances: but, as Mr. Johnson informs me, Wilfrid intends to plead guilty—the Earl of Normanton will recommend him to mercy—and though his sentence will doubtless be comparatively light, yet alas! the brand upon his name is indelible."

"Yes—indelible!" said May, mechanically repeating the word: and again she shuddered—and again too she was inspired with a feeling of devoutest thankfulness, as she mentally reviewed all the past in respect to her cousin Wilfrid and herself.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE DROPPED LETTER.

On the following day Mrs. St. George called at Apsley Court, and found May Middleton seated by herself in the drawing-room,—her father having ridden over to Burnside. Our heroine was pensive for more reasons than one. In the first place, she continued to reflect in sadness upon the death of Reuben Wallis; and in the second place she felt much on account of the irreparable degradation into which her cousin Wilfrid had fallen, No, however that she still loved him; circumstances had combined strongly to effect the ultimate destruction of that sentiment in her soul: but she could not forget that he was her relative—that he was the son of her father's elder brother—and that he bore the surname of that family to which she herself belonged. No wonder, therefore, that for these reasons she was pensive;—and for the first time since the commencement of her acquaintance with Mrs. St. George, she experienced no satisfaction on hearing that lady's name announced. There was something hanging upon her spirits which prevented her from even making the slightest effort to rally them; and though she certainly intended it not, yet there was a degree of coldness in her tone and of seriousness in her manner as she rose to receive her visitress.

"My dear friend," said Mrs. St. George, who for an instant glanced uneasily at our heroine's countenance, as if seeking for the cause of any offence which she might have given, "I am afraid that I am intruding; and yet I am only availing myself of that permission which your excellent father and yourself so kindly gave me to visit Apsley Court——"

"No—you are not intruding—— do not for an instant think so!" interrupted May, forcing her tone to express a greater cordiality than she in reality experienced with her inward feeling: "the invitation was given with all sincerity——"

"And in all frankness and friendliness," added Mrs. St. George, "do I avail myself of it. I am now relieved from the apprehension that my visit might possibly be unwelcome: but I am grieved to observe, my sweet young friend, that you are pensive and melancholy—all the more grieved, too, inasmuch as I am fearful that to me must be attributed the blame of having recently touched upon topics calculated to distress you. It is natural, May, that you should deeply feel the death of one who was almost as a brother unto you—natural likewise that you should ponder upon that disappointed affection——"

"Mrs. St. George," interrupted our heroine, gravely and firmly, "I beg——I hope you will not compel me to use the word *insist*,—that you will abandon this topic at once and for ever;"—then, after a few moments' consideration, Miss Middleton went on to observe, "I am bound to give you credit for the best and kindest intentions in speaking to me thus. Indeed, it occurs to me at the moment that, ignorant as you are of the main circumstances relating to my cousin Wilfrid, you may fancy that I have acted somewhat too harshly towards one whom you doubtless believe to have been what the world denominates 'merely a little wild, extravagant, and gay.' Those are failings" continued our heroine, in a tone which softened only under the influence of that generous nature which was prone to make allowances for the errors of her fellow creatures,—"those are failings which I could have overlooked in the hope that they would in themselves constitute the bitter experiences which would lead to a complete reformation. But Mr. Wilfrid Middleton's conduct was not of a nature to be thus lightly regarded. Remember, I am giving you these explanations because I would not wish to appear heartless or capricious in your estimation—nor in that of any of my fellow-creatures——"

"I listen to you, my dearest May, with the deepest interest," said Mrs. St. George; "and I thank you for thus affording me your confidence. Proceed, my sweet friend:"—and with a most winning cajolery of look and manner she appeared to invite the fullest outpouring of that confidence for which she had just expressed her thankfulness.

"It is not my purpose," continued Miss Middleton, "to enter upon any details in respect to the past. Those, as I informed you the other days constitute family secrets, from which the veil must not be lifted. But I will tell you something in respect to *the present*; for unfortunately no secrecy need be observed on that point, inasmuch as the public journals themselves may soon proclaim the tale——"

"What mean you, my dear friend? what mean you, my sweetest May?" inquired Mrs. St. George, whose interest deepened visibly at the turn which our heroine's discourse had just taken.

"I mean, Mrs. St. George," answered May Middleton, "that I will at once give you a reason wherefore you must never again allude to my cousin Wilfrid in a particular sense —I mean by coupling his name with my own. In a word——"

"Yes—in a word?" echoed Mrs. St.George, drawing her chair closer to that which our heroine occupied: "what—what is it, May?"

"My cousin has branded himself with indelible disgrace," responded our heroine, in an agitated voice: "he is at this moment the inmate of a felon's gaol!"

It appeared as if an ejaculation were about to burst forth from the lips of Mrs. St. George, but that she held it back; and after a brief silence, she said in a tone which struck our heroine as peculiar, "And what Mr. Wilfrid Middleton done to involve himself in this serious dilemma?"

"I see you are astonished that one who bears our name should have thus degraded it," replied Miss Middleton; "but, alas! it is so. He is accused of defrauding some great noblemen of a very large sum of money at play; and there is no doubt as to the truth of the charge. But even this is not all: for I grieve to add that it is only too well proved that he is the associate of men of the vilest and most desperate character—and that in respect to the particular accusation which weighs against him, he sought to avert the charge from himself and throw it upon another who was innocent—a young gentleman named Francis Pelham——"

"Ah!" said Mrs. St. George: for she could now no longer keep back that ejaculation which expressed feelings deeply agitated. "Francis Pelham——"

"Yes—that is the name," rejoined our heroine. "Do you happen to know him?"

"Yes—no—that is, I mean," faltered Mrs. St. George, "I have heard of him. But is it possible that Wilfrid—your cousin——"

"It is all too true!" replied May. "And now that I have revealed to you this deplorable fact, I hope and trust——"

"Oh, certainly! I understand you —to be sure!" exclaimed Mrs. George, who appeared to be strangely bewildered: "I will never more allude to Wilfrid's—I mean Mr. Middleton's name."

Our heroine gazed with some degree of astonishment, not unmingled with suspicion, upon her visitress: for it naturally appeared singular that she should be thus agitated and troubled by a piece of intelligence that could not possibly be expected to produce such an effect if she were an utter stranger to Wilfrid as May had every reason to suppose that she was. Mrs. St. George observed the manner in which our heroine was regarding her; and with one of those mechanical subterfuges with which people seek to veil their embarrassment or their confusion, she affected to be seized with a fit of coughing, and drew forth her kerchief from her reticule, or bag —which it was the fashion in those times for ladies to carry. May fancied that she might have been seized with a sudden indisposition; and she at once offered refreshments.

"No, I thank you Miss Middleton," replied Mrs. St. George, "it is merely a little cough—I shall be better presently—indeed I am quite well now. Excuse me for leaving you so abrubtly—but it has just occurred to me that I have to see a person on business at Woodbine. Farewell for the present—I shall soon do myself the pleasure of calling again."

With these words—which were uttered in rapid but broken sentences, and amidst an evident but ineffectual straining to prevent the betrayal of an increasing bewilderment and confusion—Mrs. St. George shook our heroine by the hand and abruptly quitted the drawingroom. May resumed the seat from which she had risen when she saw that her visitress was about to depart; and she sat thinking for several minutes upon the singularity of the scene which we have described. Presently—as her eyes wandered slowly round the room in a sort of vacant astonishment at Mrs. St. George's unaccountable and indeed most suspicious behaviour—our heroine's look gradually settled upon a paper which lay on the carpet. It immediately struck her that it must be a letter which her father might have dropped, and that it had been lying there, hitherto unperceived, since he quitted her about an hour back on his visit to Burnside. She picked it up—it had no address upon the outside: it had perhaps been originally forwarded in an envelope—at least if it were a letter at all. To satisfy herself on this point, May unfolded it—not for the purpose of perusing its contents, but merely just to see whether it were indeed a letter belonging to her father; and if not, whether it were a paper of any consequence and worth preserving. But what power of language can depict her astonishment—or we should rather say the sudden and almost fearful shock which she experienced—as her eye caught the words, "My dear Rosalind."

Rosalind! This was the name of Wilfrid Middleton's wife—that wife whom he had represented to be long since dead, and for whom he had gone into mourning. May trembled violently; and a sickening suspicion seized upon her.

"But no!—it must be a mistake!" was the thought which the next instant flashed to her mind: and she glanced again at the letter to observe the date that was on the top.

A half-shriek escaped her lips as she perceived that the date which the letter bore was that of only a few days back—and that consequently Rosalind must be in deed alive. The handwriting too!—May Middleton recognised it—she knew it to be her cousin's!

At this moment the door burst open; and Mrs. St. George reappeared. A glance showed her that the letter was in May's hand—an ejaculation of rage burst from her lips—and springing forward, she said in a hoarse voice but with rapid utterance, "You have read it——how dared you?"

"I have *not* read it," responded May firmly, but with a dignified indignation in her looks: "I caught the name of her to whom it was addressed—glanced at the date—and I have therefore seen sufficient to tell

me who you are. These is your letter:—and now remain not in my presence another instant!"

"I am sure I have no desire to do so," exclaimed Rosalind Middleton—for we will no longer denominate her by her fictitious name of St. George: and now with the boldest effrontery throwing off the mask, she looked and spoke in her real character—that of brazen insolence. "To think that I should have wasted my time on such a puling, sentimental minx as you are!"

May—with all the dignity which became her sex when flagrantly outraged, and which likewise became the proprietress of Apsley Court—moved towards the bell-pull for the purpose of summoning a domestic to show the infamous woman from the house.

"You need not trouble yourself," exclaimed Rosalind: "I am going to take myself off. But as it will be somewhat inconvenient for me to leave Woodbine Cottage at an instant's notice—seeiug that I have to sell off my furniture—yo u may just as well keep my secret for a day or two, and not blow upon me in the neighbourhood——"

"Begone! I make no terms with you," said Miss Middleton: and again she extended her hand towards the bell-pull.

"Well, do as you like," retorted Rosalind: "it is a matter of little consequence to me——"

"But one word!" cried May, as a sudden thought flashed to her mind. "Tell me—tell me," she continued, in all the agitation of an abruptly excited suspense,—"that tale about Reuben's death—Oh! tell me that it was all false—a part of your odious scheme—tell me this much, and I do not say that I will forgive you—but I will take it as some atonement—and I will not expose you—I will not breathe a syllable until you have taken your departure from the neighbourhood——Tell me, I beseech you!"

"Oh, the story was all true enough," answered Rosalind—and for an instant her looks flashed with a devilish malignity: but May noticed them not—for she sank down upon a chair under the weight of that feeling which follows the destruction of a suddenly excited hope.

Rosalind Middleton flaunted with dramatic majesty out of the room,—inwardly chuckling at the revenge she had just taken by planting a dagger in the heart of the innocent and amiable May.

CHAPTER XL.

THE LAPSE OF TIME.

Two years had passed away since the occurrences which we have been relating; and the few incidents which took place during this interval to vary the routine of May Middleton's life at Apsley Court, may be somewhat succinctly described.

When the period of mourning for her deceased uncle has expired, our heroine gradually began to mingle in society and to give entertainments at her own mansion. As we have already intimated, the nobility and gentry residing in Liecestershire and the adjacent counties were zealous in paying their attentions to the deceased George Middleton's heiress; and more than one youthful scion of those noble and genteel families

endeavoured to lay siege to her heart. But though always courteous and affable, she speedily knew how to discourage any such attentions when they became thus pointed—yet invariably without wounding the pride or hurting the feelings of those who were thus given to understand that May was not yet to be wooed as a bride, nor by any one of them.

On two occasions during the couple of years which thus passed, Colonel Bellasis and his daughters were invited to spend a few weeks at Apsley Court: but the Colonel, with his aristocratic pride, made himself so little agreeable, and the two young ladies gave themselves such insufferable airs, that after the second visit Farmer Middleton expressed his hope that May would not invite them again. The reader can imagine that their conduct must have been indeed unbearable when the good-hearted John Middleton was led to give utterance to such a wish; and May, for the same reason, did not think of opposing her father's desire. Caroline and Bertha Bellasis "set their caps," as the pharse goes, at some of the young noblemen and gentlemen whom they met at Apsley Court—but without any successful result; for their moderate dowries of five thousand pounds a-piece were far from being considered a compensation for their pride, their airs, their coquetry, and their ill-temper.

Mr. Beauchamp died after a short illness, just about the time that the exposure of Mrs. St. George—or rather of Rosalind Middleton—took place, as recorded in the preceding chapter. The moment the intelligence reached May, she despatched the kindest letter of condolence to her two orphaned cousins, and offered them a home at Apsley Court. The invitation was conveyed in terms alike so delicate and sincere as to justify all the most favourable sentiments that the two sisters had from the first entertained with respect to their cousin. Accordingly, when a few weeks had elapsed from the date of their father's death, they quitted the metropolis and set off for Leicestershire, where they were received with open arms by Mr. Middleton and May. Our heroine had no reason to regret the kindness which she thus demonstrated towards her cousins Emily and Lucy. She found them, as she had always fancied, to be naturally of the most amiable dispositions; and now that death had withdrawn the pernicious influence which to some little extent Mr. Beauchamp had wielded over their minds, all the good traits of the orphan sisters shone out in their proper light.

Time wore on—the year of their own deep mourning passed away—they were then enabled to mingle in society—and they speedily became favourites amongst all those whose good opinion it was worth while to possess. Unlike their cousins Caroline and Bertha, the orphan sisters were bashful and retiring; and if any one had ventured to hint to them the policy of laying themselves out to catch the most eligible suitors, they would have shrunk from the indelicacy and the worldly-minded egotism of such a proceeding. Their good looks, their amiable dispositions, their polished manners, and

their accomplishments were not however long before they made an impression upon several of those young noblemen and gentlemen at whom Caroline and Bertha Bellasis had so vainly set their caps: and to be brief, at the expiration of the interval of two years which we have represented as passing, the elder Miss Beauchamp became the happy bride of the Hon. Henry Colyton, the only son of a wealthy nobleman, while Lucy's heart and hand were engaged to Frederick Mordaunt, the heir of one of the wealthiest gentlemen in Leicestershire. The dowers of the sisters—namely, ten thousand pounds a-piece—were comparatively too insignificant to tempt either of the gentleman: and thus the excellent alliance which Emily had already formed, and that which Lucy was engaged in a few months to contract, were won for them entirely by their own personal charms and mental qualifications. Colonel Bellasis and his two daughters received invitations to the wedding of Emily Beauchamp, which was celebrated at Apsley Court: but they sent excuses—for the Colonel could not bear to think that his nieces had been preferred to his own children—while Caroline and Bertha themselves felt that they should be unable to conceal their spite and mortification if they made their appearance at the birdal scene.

After the honeymoon, the Hon. Mr. and Mrs. Colyton proceeded to take up their abode at a handsome country seat which was prepared for their reception, about fifteen miles distant from Apsley Court. Lucy Beauhamp went to pass a couple of months with her sister; and, during this interval, May was comparatively alone again at her mansion. But then the time came that she and her father were likewise to be visitors at Colyton Park, where they remained until after the bridal of the handsome young Frederick Mordaunt and the amiable Lucy. Thus the flight of time brought our heroine to within about three months of the date when she would attain her majority.

As the reader has seen, she had invariably discouraged any attentions the moment they appeared to partake of a marked and tender character. And why had she done this? Her deceased uncle's injunction had merely gone to the extent that she should not contract any marriage until the attainment of her twenty-first year: but this was the mere letter of the stipulation—while on the other hand there was a secret voice in May's soul which told her that the spirit of her departed relative's meaning was that she should not even contract any engagement, but retain her troth unpledged. And often and often did the suspicion arise in her mind that she was not altogether ignorant of her late uncle's motive in expressing such a wish; and then too that portion of the gipsy's prophecy which was contained in the third verse of the chant came back to her recollection. Often and often, too, would she find herself repeating that verse amidst feelings the precise nature of which she could scarcely explain unto herself, and in a sort of bewilderment as to whether she were doing wrong thus to think of it so frequently, or

whether it were well for her to cling to it as the only portion of that foreshadowed destiny of hers which as yet remained unfulfilled. The reader cannot have forgotten that the lines ran as follows :—

" Here amidst the varied tracing,
Entertwining—interlacing—
I discern the soft revealings
Of the bosom's tenderest feelings!
Here is the passion that blighted must prove—
Here is the friendship shall ripen to love ;
While regrets for the worthless are passing away,
Here's the true feeling that ever shall stay.
Mystic tracing—tangled web,
That speaks of love's flow as well as its ebb ;
The tale thou revealest is drawn from the past—
And thou, gentle maid, shall be happy at last !
When upon thee dawns the light—
When thou readest thine heart aright—
When the lustre that dazzled awhile shall wane,
And the first true feeling alone remain,—
Then the wanderer over the world so wide
Shall return to claim thee as his bride !"

" Yes," May would often and often say to herself, when in the retirement and solitude of her own boudoir, " the wild insensate love which I experienced for Wilfrid has indeed passed away ; and it is now a subject even of astonishment that I could even have been so dazzled by him. And, oh ! if I look deep, deep down into my own heart, I feel—yes, I feel that the friendship which I then experienced for *another* has been strengthening and strengthening until it has grown into an attachment which, whether he be alive or dead, never can be destroyed in this heart of mine ! But that prophecy—is it ever to be fulfilled ? is he whom I was so cruelly told to look upon as no more—is *he* really in the land of the living ? is he a wanderer in far-off climes ? and will he ever come back to learn from my lips that I have been led to love him at last ? "

May could not persuade herself that Rosalind Middleton's parting assurance of Reuben Wallis's death was true ; and yet, on the other hand, she was often haunted by misgivings to the effect that the prediction never could be fufilled. Her father, who was a plain matter-of-fact man, had at once resigned himself to the worst in respect to Reuben Wallis : and on hearing the account of Rosalind Middleton's exposure, he had declared his belief in that parting assurance which she had given May relative to the lost one's decease.

" For, what object could she have had," Mr. Middleton reasoned at the time, and had often reasoned since, " in persisting in such a cruel deception when she herself was unmasked and her schemes were at an end ? Judging by the flippant insolence and brazen effrontery with which she treated you on the occasion, my dearest May, it is to be presumed that she would have exultingly proclaimed the falsity of the tale in order to laugh at us both for having

been beguiled by it. But no!—she assured you that it was true—and, alas! I fear that it was so. We shall never again see poor Reuben Wallis!"

These words, which Mr. Middleton had spoken at the time, and which he had frequently repeated since, haunted poor May, and kept those misgivings to which we have alluded floating in her mind. On the other hand, she endeavoured to persuade herself that Rosalind Middleton had only given that parting assurance with the vindictive purpose of distressing her: but it was not altogether easy—nor indeed possible, to settle her mind to such a conclusion. Therefore, in respect to the alleged death of Reuben Wallis, our heroine continued in a state of uncertainty.

"But if he return," she would say to herself, "and if he should still entertain towards me the same sentiments which he experienced at Burnside, he shall not again plead vainly for a favourable response. Alas, alas! it was all through me that he so suddenly abandoned a comfortable home; and if he have been, and still is, a wanderer over the world, it is I who was the cause of this restlessness of spirit! My conduct was not well towards him: I owe him an atonement——and now, not merely does a sense of duty, but likewise the feeling of my own heart, prompt me to make it——and grant, O Father of Mercy! that he may indeed be alive to come back and claim that atonement at my hands!"

From all that we have just been recording, the reader is enabled to form an accurate idea of the state of our heroine's feelings with respect to the long-lost Reuben Wallis; nor must we forget to add that when amidst the recesses of her writing-desk her eye occasionally settled upon that sealed packet which she had received from her late uncle so short a time previous to his decease, she could not help thinking that amongst the mysteries it was perhaps to reveal or the explanations it was to give, some mention would be made of the name of Reuben Wallis.

It wanted, as we have said, about three months to the date when May Middleton would attain her twenty-first year—and one morning, soon after the return to Apsley Court after the bridal of young Mr. Mordaunt and Lucy at Colyton Park, Mr. Middleton received a letter from Mr. Johnson, the solicitor in London. This gentleman stated that has the period of Miss Middleton's minority was now drawing to a close—and as there were certain deeds in respect to her fortune and estates to be perused, as well as others to be prepared—it would be as well if the work were soon entered upon, so that there should be nothing more to do on her twenty-first birthday than for her to sign the usual release from the trusteeship. The worthy man of business went on to propose in his friendly letter that Mr. Middleton should pay himself and Mrs. Johnson a three months' visit at their residence in the metropolis: and he conveyed this invitation in a manner which scarcely admitted of any refusal, even if there were the least desire on the part of our heroine and her father to decline it. But there was none. Mr. Middleton's health—never strong—had of late been failing somewhat: and his

anxious loving, and affectionate daughter had more than once besought him to seek the advice of eminent London physicians. On the other hand, it now occurred to Mr. Middleton, on the receipt of the attorney's letter, that it was suitable and proper for his daughter, as a wealthy heiress, to become acquainted with the metropolis, which she had never yet seen. Mr. Johnson's invitation was therefore accepted—the necessary preparations were soon completed—and Farmer Middleton, accompanied by his daughter, set out in a neat travelling-carriage for the British capital.

Mr. Johnson, who was a man of considerable substance, possessed a handsome house at the West End of the town, and being of the highest respectability, he moved in excellent society. His wife was an amiable woman; they had no children; but in the absence of those ties they were not the less attached to each other. Mr. Middleton and May experienced a most cordial reception; and the first week or two of their sojourn in London was spent in visiting the principal public buildings, institutions, and other scenes of attraction. During this period, the Johnsons invited no guests to their house; they wished to make their visitors as much "at home" as possible; and therefore they postponed those occasions when ceremony and formality would, more or less, have to be observed.

It may easily be supposed that Mr. Middleton, on arriving in London, seized an early opportunity of asking the lawyer whether he had recently learnt any intelligence in respect to Wilfrid or his wife?

"Ah!" responded Mr. Johnson, "that was, indeed, a very black affair—I mean the deception with regard to Rosalind. The story of her death was so well managed that I frankly confess I was completely deceived by it at the time: you may suppose, therefore, how astounded I was on receiving that letter in which you told me all about the fictitious Mrs. St. George, and the way in which she was unmasked."

"But about Wilfrid," said Mr. Middleton.

"I have never heard of him since he came out of prison," replied the lawyer "or else rest assured that I should have let you know—at least if I had learnt any good tidings of him—for I am not so certain that I should have afflicted you with any evil intelligence if it had reached me."

"Your consideration is most kind," observed Farmer Middleton, shaking the worthy lawyer by the hand. "And how did my unfortunate nephew bear his imprisonment?"

"You must have comprehended," replied Mr. Johnson, "the statement which I duly made to you by letter—Indeed, the conduct of that young man Francis Pelham was most admirable throughout. During the two months that Wilfrid lay in Newgate until his trial came on, Pelham paid the proprietor of a neighbouring tavern to send him in his meals: for, of course, when your nephew was arrested, all the money was taken from him. He had just the three thousand guineas he had won from the Earl of Normanton—"

"And did this Francis Pelham visit him in gaol?" inquired Mr. Middleton.

"No: for I insisted that he should not do so," answered Mr. Johnson. "The fact is, I happened to be Mr. Pelham's solicitor—"

"And Wilfrid pleaded guilty?" said Farmer Middleton; "and the Earl of Normanton recommended him to mercy?"

"Yes—just as I wrote and told you," added the lawyer. "And so, as he had then been two months in gaol, and the money was all got back, and the recommendation to mercy was so strong, the Recorder thought the justice of the case would be answered by condemning him to another month's imprisonment—which he accordingly had to undergo."

"And when he came out, I think you told me in your letter——"

"He had a couple of hundred guineas put into his hand," rejoined Mr. Johnson. "And now I will tell you what I did *not* communicate in writing—that this sum of two hundred guineas came out of Francis Pelham's own purse, though it was my hand that placed that amount in Wilfrid's. I manage all Pelham's money matters; and therefore I know that what I am telling you is the fact."

"How handsome! how generous!" exclaimed Farmer Middleton. "And yet it was this very Francis Pelham whom my graceless nephew sought to ruin! But what of Wilfrid's wife?"

"It appears that she visited him several times in Newgate—and on the day that he issued thence," continued the attorney, "she was waiting in the street to receive him: for I also was waiting there, to hand over the money which Francis Pelham was conveying to him by my agency. I gave him some good advice, but I am sorry to say that so soon as he had got hold of the coin he seemed impatient enough of the counsel. He hastened to join his wife; and since that day I have neither seen nor heard of them again."

"And those villains Cranston and O'Halloran?" said Mr. Middleton—"I could not exactly understand the account you gave me of them?"

"Ah, I see!" ejaculated the lawyer: "you gentlemen who live in the country do not understand much about these sort of things. I told you in my letter that sentence of death was recorded against them, but that it was not carried into execution: which means that they were condemned to be hanged but weren't. No—they were transported for life. There were two distinct indictments against them—one preferred by a Mr. Hamer, the other by General Ruthven. Hamer's indictment broke down, and I will tell you how. It seems that he was attacked by two fellows in the street, and he himself could not swear to their identity. He was rescued by a party of jovial blades,—one of whom caught a glimpse of the villains as they were escaping. He did not know who they were at the time; but some little while afterwards he saw them in the Strand walking together—he felt assured that they were the same—he followed them, learnt their names, and went and gave information to Hamer. It was on this evidence that the warrants were issued: but when the case came on for trial at the Old Bailey, the witness alluded to was constrained to confess that he was much intoxicat-

ed on the night when the outrage happened. This admission caused the indictment to break down. But General Ruthven's charge was completely successful, inasmuch as it was shown that Cranston and O'Halloran were the two identical scoundrels who escaped out of the cage at Hounslow. But the General, who is a kind-hearted man, declared that he was averse to have the extreme penalty of the law put in force against the culprits; he accordingly recommended them to mercy—and the Recorder, as I have told you, taking the most lenient view of the case, sentenced them to transportation for life. It was Pelham, my dear sir—Francis Pelham, who was more or less at the bottom of that recommendation also:—for he carries the mercifulness of his disposition even to a fault."

"You have said so much about this Francis Pelham," remarked Mr. Middleton, "that I should like to see him. Indeed, I am in duty bound to thank him for his kindness towards my nephew: for in spite of all that Wilfrid has done, I cannot of course possibly forget that he *is* my nephew. Indeed, as you know very well—"

"You would have sent him a sum of money when he was coming out of Newgate," interjected Mr. Johnson, "but I wrote firmly and resolutely to beg that you would leave the matter in the hands of others. As for Francis Pelham, he is not now in London: he has been travelling about for the last two years—ever since the time that Wilfrid came out of Newgate. He has been in Italy, and Greece, and Turkey, and I am sure I know not where else. But I had a letter from him the other day; and I have every reason to believe he will be in London in about a fortnight. You shall then see him; for mine will be the first house that he will visit—unless indeed it is General Ruthven's; for between you and me, my dear Mr. Middleton, the General has got a sweet pretty daughter—Josephine by name—and it is possible there is something in that quarter. Young people will be young people, you know; and as Mr. Pelham is by no means ill-looking, and Josephine is beautiful, and the General looks upon the young gentleman with the utmost favour—"

"I comprehend," said Mr. Middleton, with a smile: "there will be a wedding in that quarter."

"Yes: and now I bethink me," ejaculated Mr. Johnson, "if it *do* take place, we will make your charming May one of the bridesmaids. So you may just drop her a hint to this effect when Mr. Pelham arrives in town; but don't say a word till then, as I shall know something more of it when he does come."

"I will be all discretion until the proper time," answered Mr. Middleton.

Here ended the conversation, which as we have already intimated, took place very soon after the arrival of the farmer and his daughter at Mr. Johnson's house. Mr. Middleton communicated the whole of it to May, with the exception of the concluding portion relative to which he had been enjoined to exercise so much discretion. A fortnight then passed, as we have likewise stated,—during which the sights of London were visited: and we must add that

Mr. Middleton failed not to consult an eminent physician in respect to his health. The opinion delivered by the medical authority afforded much relief to the worthy farmer's mind, and was a source of the most joyous hope fulness to the affectionate May.

CHAPTER XLI.

THE DINNER-PARTY.

At the expiration of the fortnight, Mr. Johnson said, one morning at breakfast, after perusing a letter that was delivered to him, "Mr. Pelham arrived in town last evening, and will dine with us to-day."

"I am glad of it!" exclaimed the farmer: "I long to give that young gentleman a hearty shake of the hand!"

"Now, my dear Mrs. Johnson," resumed the attorney, "we must have some few friends to meet him. I did apprehend he would go to the General's first—but, as you see, he has given us the preference—so the General and Miss Ruthven must come and dine here. I will call round there presently—I am certain to be able to secure them. Then, whom else shall we have?"

"The Earl of Normanton, of course," suggested Mrs. Johnson. "You know what a liking his lordship took to Mr. Pelham—and how much he wished to have the young gentleman to pass a few months with him at Normanton Manor—and how vexed he was when Mr. Pelham persisted in going abroad to travel, heaven only knows where!"

"Yes, my dear," responded the lawyer: "we will have the Earl of Normanton—for I know that he will be in town to-day."

"And how do you know that?" inquired Mrs. Johnson.

"Because, my dear," answered the solicitor, "I wrote to him a pressing letter yesterday at Normanton Manor, requesting him to come up to London on some particular business with which he charged me. I don't mind telling you what it is—it is no secret," continued Mr. Johnson, with a smile; and he thus talked and sat by turns. "The fact is, from some little conversation which I happened to have with the Earl a few weeks ago, the name of a person named Hodgson was mentioned. He was once a clergyman, but has been in sad troubles; and it appears that the Earl is most anxious to find him out——"

"And for what purpose?" inquired Mrs. Johnson, who, though a most amiable and excellent woman, had a tinge of that little feminine weakness which is supposed to have descended to the sex direct from Mother Eve herself.

"Ah! *that* I cannot tell you!" responded the attorney—but whether he meant that he was unable or unwilling, could not be gathered from his looks. "However, I have managed to trace out this Mr. Hodgson—and I find him to be an inmate of the King's Bench Prison, where he has languished for a number of years. This discovery I made yesterday: I wrote by last night's post to the Earl, who is at his manor near Richmond; and I have no doubt that when he gets the letter this morning, he will start at once for London. So you may make up your mind, my dear,

that his lordship will dine with us this afternoon."

"And I think, with due deference, we require no one else," suggested Mrs. Johnson. "There will be the Earl, General Ruthven and his daughter, Mr. Pelham, and our four selves—a pleasant little party of eight."

"Be it so," assented the solicitor and the conversation then flowed into some other channel.

The lawyer's dinner-hour was five o'clock: and a quarter of an hour before that time, Mrs. Johnson, Mr. Middleton, and May were assembled in the drawing-room: Mr. Johnson himself was absent on some business, but was expected to return every minute. May looked not merely sweetly beautiful, but eminently handsome. She was seventeen when we first introduced her to the reader—she was now nearly one-and-twenty, and the lapse of four years had developed her more girlish loveliness into the rich beauty of womanhood. Her figure retained all its matchless symmetry, though with fuller contours: the proportions of her shape were as faultless as ever, though richer in their more matured developments. Her raven hair was arranged in luxuriant bands, reaching far below the ears, and then gathered up in a knot at the back of the admirably shaped head,—precisely the same fashion which she was wont to adopt when simply the farmer's daughter, and before she ever dreamt of becoming the possessor of a fortune and the mistress of Apsley Court. Yes—the fashion was the same: but, as a matter of course, more care was now bestowed upon the arrangement of that luxuriant hair than when she had the household duties of Burnside to attend to; for whereas *then* there might be a certain coquettish negligence in the tying of the Grecian knot, it was now perfected with the utmost nicety by the hands of her maid. Yes—supremely beautiful looked May Middleton! Her complexion had never altogether lost that soft embrowning tint which mingled with the hue of health upon her cheeks: but still that complexion was fairer and more delicate than it was wont to be a few years past. The expression of her countenance was more serious than in those times when so much artless good-humour mingled with its innocence: but the innocence was still there, precisely the same, though the wreathing smile of girlish gaiety had become sobered down into one of pensive sweetness. There was now, so to speak, more of "the lady" in her look and manner than when we first introduced her to our readers—though there had always been a certain natural gentility and an intuitive air of good-breeding about May Middleton, even when she was nothing more than the farmer's daughter. It had therefore required but the slightest gloss of refinement to shed a polish over all, and to adapt the damsel of the farm-homestead for the atmosphere of the brilliantly-lighted drawing-room. One word more in respect to May, and we proceed with our narrative. On the present occasion she was dressed with an elegant simplicity, with the most perfect taste, and likewise in a manner which set off her exquisite beauty to all its fullest advantage—though she herself was perfectly

innocent of any studied art to produce such an effect.

We have said that Mrs. Johnson, Mr. Middleton, and his daughter were assembled in the drawing-room as the dinner-hour approached—the solicitor himself being still absent on some business which detained him, but his speedy return being expected. Presently a door opened, and a domestic announced General and Miss Ruthven. They were welcomed by Mrs. Johnson, and introduced to Mr. Middleton and May. They already knew whom they were to meet on the present occasion: and they had also heard from the lips of Mr. Johnson everything most favourable and complimentary in respect to our heroine and her father. The General, therefore, with true military frankness, soon placed himself on a friendly footing with Mr. Middleton; while Josephine and May as quickly got on similar terms with each other. Presently the Earl of Normanton was announced: and he likewise exhibited a most friendly demeanour towards Mr. and Miss Middleton. Indeed, the nobleman appeared to unbend even more than was his wont, in order to do honour to those guests of which Mr. Johnson had not failed to speak in accordance with their merits.

"Have you seen our young friend Pelham?" presently inquired General Ruthven of the Earl. "He paid us a visit this morning, and left us with the intention of calling upon your lordship."

"Yes—I was fortunately at home at my town residence," answered the Earl: "for I came up early this morning from Richmond. I was rejoiced to see our friend Francis; and I need not ask, General, whether you likewise were? But, my dear madam," added the Earl, turning with a slight anxious impatience towards Mrs. Johnson, "is not your husband at home? will he not soon make his appearance?"

"I expect him every instant, my lord," replied Mrs. Johnson.

The Earl of Normanton watched an opportunity when Mr. Middleton was making some remarks to the lawyer's wife; and he drew General Ruthven into a window recess.

"You remember, my dear General," said the Earl in an under-tone which was more or less tremulous with emotion, "that when upwards of two years back I told you my sad tale, I made special mention of a clergyman of the name of Hodgson, who I thought could give me some most important information——"

"I remember it full well," answered the General, also speaking in a low tone: "not one single syllable of that narrative of yours has been forgotten by me!"

"And now, at last," said the Earl of Normanton, "that clergyman has been discovered. A few weeks ago, while in discourse with Mr. Johnson upon ordinary topics, he casually mentioned how by some cunning means a certain Bow Street officer had ferreted out a debtor whom he was most anxious to find, and whom he had lost sight of for a great number of years. I could not help mentioning to Johnson that I myself was most anxious to discover a particular individual: he volunteered his services—or rather he offered his assistance in employing the same officer who had

been so useful in his own case. I accepted the proposal,—little hoping however that after the lapse of so many years it would lead to a fortunate result. Yet such has been the case!"

"And your lordship has at length found this man Hodgson?" said General Ruthven.

"Yes: he was yesterday discovered to be an inmate of the King's Bench Prison. Johnson at once wrote to me—I received this letter this morning--and speedily came up to London. Ah, my dear General," continued the Earl, "you may easily conceive that in my impatience to learn something of my ever-beloved but long-lost Agnes, I could at once have flown to that prison to question Hodgson upon the point: but Johnson kept me back! He informed me that the wretched man has sunk down into tho lowest degradation through poverty and intemperance, and that it was not therefore advisable for me to visit him in his gaol until he had been prepared to receive me. I at once instructed the worthy solicitor to take measures for Hodgson's liberation: and as I would not show a want of confidence in our friend Johnson, I confided to him my motive for wishing to see Hodgson. In a word, I told him all my history, as sometime back I related it to you. It is most probable that I shall see Hodgson this very evening—it is that business which no doubt detains Johnson now —and you can conceive the anxiety I experience to hear whatsoever that man may have to reveal. I should not have come amidst a scene of gaiety on the present occasion, were it not that my absence would have the appearance of a slight towards our friend Francis Pelham, for whom the party is made."

At this moment the door opened, and Francis Pelham himself was announced. We may as well observe that he was now about three-and-twenty—but he looked perhaps a year or two older on account of wearing a moustache and having suffered his beard to grow. It was not a ragged hirsute mass—but it was a short, well-trimmed beard, and having that outward curl which descended to it from the whiskers. It was a shade deeper than the colour of the hair of the head, which was of a very dark brown—and which, with its glossy natural curls, or rather continuous, undulations, was worn long. Though the lips themselves were well-nigh concealed by moustache and beard, yet the smile which parted those lips, as Francis Pelham entered the room, displayed two rows of brilliant teeth. The upper part of Mr. Pelham's countenance was interesting and well-looking, if not absolutely handsome. His nose was perfectly straight—the forehead was high—there was a frank, honest expression in his blue eyes: but his cheeks were pale and somewhat haggard—perhaps with the fatigue of long travel, perhaps with some inward care—or it might be the effect of both conjoined. His form was slender: he was dressed well, but without pretension; and his manner indicated the ease and gentility of one who had been accustomed for at least some time past, if not from his earliest days, to mingle in the very best society.

Mrs. Johnson at once advanced to give Mr. Pelham a most cordial welcome: and she then introduced him to Mr. Middleton and our heroine. He bowed to them without speaking; and it was even with some degree of abruptness that he turned aside to shake hands with the Earl of Normanton, with General Ruthven, and with Josephine. That he was on a very intimate footing with the General and his daughter, might be judged from the fact that the veteran addressed him as "my dear boy"—while he himself and the young lady called each other by their Christian names—"Francis" and "Josephine:" so that Mr. Middleton beheld in this circumstance a confirmation of the hint he had received from the lawyer to the effect that the young gentleman and the General's daughter were lovers and engaged to be united in matrimonial bonds.

May Middleton experienced a singular but scarcely definable sensation when Francis Pelham was introduced to her. She had heard so much of him—and everything so entirely in his favour—that she had been naturally anxious to form his acquaintance: she knew that her father purposed to take an opportunity of expressing his gratitude to Mr. Pelham for his noble conduct towards Wilfrid—and her own natural generosity of heart would have perhaps prompted her to say something in a similar strain. But there was a sort of damp thrown upon her, as it were, when Mr. Pelham bowed with what she could not help feeling to be an air of constraint, if not of actual coldness towards her father and herself. She was not exactly hurt—much less wounded—because, after all, his conduct was sufficiently polite towards them as strangers: but still it had struck her that it would prove something more friendly. The same idea occurred to Mr. Middleton; and he could not help whispering to May, "I am really afraid that Mr. Pelham is not over well pleased to meet us, because we have the misfortune to be so nearly related to Wilfrid, who so wickedly sought to ruin him."

Before May had time to give any answer to her father's observation, the door again opened, and Mr. Johnson bustled into the room. Cordial were the greetings which passed between himself and Francis Pelham; and then the attorney drew the Earl of Normanton into the window-recess,—for he perceived how anxious the nobleman was to receive whatsoever communication he had to make.

"My dear Earl," said Mr. Johnson, "everything has been done according to your instructions. Hodgson is free. It took me a considerable time to ferret out his creditors and arrange with them; and this is the reason of my being so late. I have left my head clerk with Hodgson——"

"But when shall I see him?" inquired the Earl impatiently.

"This evening, my lord. My clerk is fitting him out with new raiment, and all that sort of thing, to make him look as decent as possible; and I have directed that he is to be brought to my house at nine o'clock this evening—so that you may have an opportunity of questioning him. I myself have said nothing on the *one* important subject, beyond putting the single question, whether he really

can give your lordship any information on a particular point? He says that he can—But here is a servant to announce that dinner is ready; and your lordship must really control your impatience for a few brief hours. It is now half-past five—at nine Mr. Hodgson will be here."

Dinner being announced, the Earl of Normanton gave his arm to the mistress of the house—Mr. Johnson took charge of May—Francis Pelham followed with Josephine Ruthven—the General and Mr. Middleton brought up the rear. At the dinner-table May found herself precisely opposite to Mr. Pelham; and she could not help frequently stealing a glance at him—she knew not why—and she caught herself blushing on each occasion at her own furtive procedure. And now too, as he conversed gaily with Miss Ruthven, the tones of his voice seemed to touch some chord in May's bosom in a manner which appeared to thrill through her. She could not prevent herself from listening to all that he said; and Mr. Johnson had to repeat his own observations two or three times before May was startled from her pre-occupation and able to give him an answer. Then she blushed—was seized with confusion—and laboured under an embarrassment such as for a long time past she had not known. Mr. Johnson however, either through kindness and courtesy, or for some other motive, affected not to notice that our heroine was thus confused and flurried; and the other persons at the table were too much occupied with their own discourse, or with the proceedings of the banquet, to notice anything peculiar on the part of our heroine——unless, indeed, Mr. Pelham himself was an exception: for he certainly every now and then turned a quick glance upon May: but if his looks encountered hers they were speedily withdrawn—while our heroine's were cast down in confusion.

Thus passed the time until Mrs. Johnson rose to withdraw; and she was of course followed by May Middleton and Josephine Ruthven. The gentlemen were now left to themselves; and Mr. Middleton, who had hitherto been conversing principally with the General, had an opportunity of devoting more of his attention to Francis Pelham. The young gentleman, on being questioned concerning his travels, was compelled to give some account thereof; his discourse was full of interest—but his anecdotes were narrated in the most modest and unassuming manner. Mr. Middleton was especially delighted with him: he felt his heart expending and warming towards that young man; and he too experienced, from the tones of his voice, somewhat of the same effect which they had produced upon his daughter. In a word, Farmer Middleton felt as Francis Pelham were no stranger of a few short hours' acquaintance, but as if he had known him long and intimately—and yet he could not possibly account for such a feeling. He took an opportunity, during a pause in the conversation to draw his chair closer to that which Pelham occupied; and in a low voice, he said, "Permit me, Mr. Pelham, to proffer my deepest regrets for the treatment you experienced at the hands of a nephew of

mine between two and three years ago—and at the same time to tender my sincerest thanks for your noble, your magnanimous conduct towards him."

It seemed as if Francis Pelham could not give utterance to the reply which rose to his lips: and taking Mr. Middleton's hand, he pressed it warmly in his own for several moments. The heart of the farmer expanded with still more fervid feelings—but yet all unknown and unaccountable—towards Francis Pelham; and he would have said something, but his own power of utterance was likewise drowned in undefinable emotions.

The door opened; and a domestic entering, whispered something in the ear of Mr. Johnson.

"My dear Earl," said the lawyer, aside to the nobleman, "Mr. Hodgson is now in the house. Gentlemen," he added aloud, turning towards General Ruthven, Mr. Middleton, and Francis Pelham, "the ladies await your presence in the drawing-room: his lordship and I have some little business to transact, and we will join you there presently."

CHAPTER XLII.

Mr. Hodgson.

Mr. Hodgson was a man of about sixty-five years of age in reality, though he looked ten older, so great was the ravages which dissipation, care, and suffering had made upon him. He was emaciated almost to the leanness of the skeleton; his countenance was pale and ghastly: he had a continuous trumbling of the limbs and a nervous shaking of the head. All that new garments and clean linen could possibly achieve towards the improvement of his personal appearance, had been done; and Mr. Johnson had now certainly less repugnance in suffering him to be presented to the Earl of Normanton than he had when visiting him in the morning in his room at the King's Bench Prison. Mr. Hodgson had already been informed that his benefactor was the Earl, for whom the solicitor merely acted as an agent; and when the nobleman was conducted to the apartment to which the old man had been shown, the latter hastened to fling himself at his lordship's feet. The Earl flew to raise him up: the lawyer entreated him to compose his feelings: and the three sat down together to converse upon the important topic which had led to this interview.

"I understand, Mr. Hodgson," said the Earl—"indeed, for many long years I have more than suspected—I have felt convinced—that you could tell me something with regard to one whom I dearly, dearly loved——I mean," he added, in a tone tremulous with anxiety and suspense, "with respect to her who bore the name of Agnes Markland——"

"But who, my lord, if she were alive," responded Hodgson solemnly, "would be the Countess of Normanton."

"Ah! you know it?" exclaimed the Earl, seized with a strong quivering. "But you say *if she were alive*! You know, then—you have a certainty that she is no more? Speak, for heaven's sake!" he added, with a look of indescribable distress: and his countenance was pale as death.

"Nay, my lord—I said not that I knew it for a certainty," answered the old man: "nor can I give you any positive assurance on the point."

"Then tell me all you do know!" said the Earl hastily: "keep me not in suspense——It is anguish! it is death!"

"I will make my tale as brief as possible, my lord," rejoined Hodgson. "I need scarcely remind your lordship that I possessed an incumbency——"

"I know it—I know it," ejaculated Normanton: "I knew you by name when I was at school there. For heaven's sake proceed!"

"One night, my lord," resumed Hodgson, "an elderly gentleman called at my house, just as I was about to retire to rest; and he besought me to visit an old female servant of his, who was at the point of death, and earned for spiritual consolation. I lost not a moment in complying with the request that I would accompany the gentleman to his habitation—I need not tell your lordship where it was, nor who the old woman was to whose death-bed I was summoned."

"No—it is not needful!" said the Earl, in a state of feverish suspense. "For heaven's sake continue!"

"While proceeding on my way with the elderly gentleman," resumed Mr. Hodgson, "he informed me that the. l[illegible]d not long tenanted the cottage mate [illegible] the old woman was residing it. A [illegible]when he took possession of it—

"Ag[illegible] he had kept her on as his my outra[illegible]ant, the only one whom he Earl of N[illegible]d or chose to have, for he his despair[illegible] limited means as well as long years [illegible] habits. He moreover stated that until this sudden illness had overtaken his old dependant, he had considered her to have partially lost her intellect—indeed to have fallen into her dotage; but now that she was stretched upon her death-bed, her reason appeared to have returned completely—her intellect, with all the accompanying power of memory, had regained its pristine lucidity. Such were the particulars which I learnt on my way to the cottage; and on arriving there, I was at once conducted up into the chamber where the old woman lay. Her master—judging by the circumstance of her having sent for me, that whatsoever revelations she had to make were intended for my ear alone—considerately left the room; but the dying woman was not satisfied with his disappearance—she besought me to open the door gently and assure myself that he was not listening—"

"Yes, yes—go on!" said the Earl of Normanton, racked by the tortures of feverish impatience.

"I was alone with that dying woman," proceeded Mr. Hodgson; "and she began by enjoining me to swear that I would never reveal what she was about to tell me to any other ear than to yours, my lord—or to any friend whom you might choose to hear the narrative—"

"And such a friend is now present," said the Earl, glancing towards Mr. Johnson. "You have my full authority to proceed."

Mr. Hodgson bowed, and continued in the following manner:—

"I informed the dying woman that I could not possibly bind myself by any specific oath—but that so far as I might with reason and propriety

fulfil her request, it should be obeyed She was satisfied, and she then commenced her narrative. She told me how a young gentleman whom she had long known only by the name of Derwent had loved her young mistress, the beautiful Agnes—"

"Oh, pass over all that!" interrupted the Earl of Normanton, groaning in the bitterness of his anguish and suspense; "and come at once to whatsoever you may have to tell me, and that I myself do not as yet know. Take up the thread of your narrative, if you will, at the time when I brought my Agnes back from Scotland, and when I left her there, at that cottage, while I proceeded to London to visit my father, who was dangerously ill."

"The dying woman, my lord," continued Hodgson, "informed me that the unfortunate Agnes clung for a time to the conviction that you would soon return—then that conviction diminished into a mere hope—and then at last, goaded to despair, she penned a letter——"

"I know it," interrupted the Earl; "and it was answered by my villanous uncle——God pardon me for speaking thus bitterly of the dead! I know too in what a perfidious sense he answered it!"

"Painful as it is, my lord, for me to reveal unpleasant things," continued Mr. Hodgson, "it is nevertheless my duty to inform you that the unhappy young lady was driven almost frantic by that letter; yet not one word of reproach fell from her lips against your lordship! She loved you—she pitied you for the constraint which she believed you must have put upon your feelings——"

"O Agnes, Agnes!" murmured the wretched nobleman; and covering his face with his hands, he wept bitterly. "So young—so beautiful—so amiable and so loving——"

"And—and—about to become a mother too," added Mr. Hodgson, hesitatingly and apprehensively.

The Earl of Normanton started as if a serpent had stung him, his hands fell as if palsied from his countenance—he stared wildly upon the old clergyman—his lips quivered for a few moments—he gasped as if for the power to utter some word or sound, and then, as a strong cry of agony came up from his throat, he exclaimed, "No, no! do not tell me that which will increase my tortures ten thousand fold—Oh, do not!"

Mr. Hodgson remained silent—evidently frightened at the effect produced by a revelation which he had indeed at the time hesitated and trembled to make: but Mr. Johnson said in a voice of mingled remonstrance, compassion, and encouragement to the Earl, "Your lordship desires to learn the truth—the full truth—and nothing but the truth!"

"Well spoken, my good friend," said the nobleman, pressing the lawyer's hand: then hastily wiping away the tears from his eyes, and exerting an almost preternatural effort to control his feelings, he said, "Go on, Mr. Hodgson—pardon th[...] interruptions—but—but—you c[...] be- make allowances." hom

"I can, my lord—I do," answ[...] of the old man, who was himsel[...] inspired by emotions of a [...]ed the more genuine, and a more kind than for many a [...]as given he had experienced. "I [...]er of the

well understand how this narrative is calculated to affect your lordship. Yes—it is true! the un-happy Agnes was in a way to become a mother: but her position had been hitherto concealed from every one except the old woman. Shortly, however, the time came when she could conceal it no longer; and the idea of being disgraced in the eyes of the world—of being looked upon with scorn and contempt—was maddening to her. She dared not proclaim that she was a wife:—to do so would compel her to declare who her husband was, and to take the title which belonged to her. But this she would not do! In the first place, Lord Tylden's letter had bidden her at her peril assume the title of Viscountess; and, moreover, she feared that it would offend or injure your lordship:—and not for worlds would she do this! One day she told the old woman that she was going to leave the cottage for ever. The faithful dependant wept and entreated: but Agnes was firm. She could no longer conceal her position, which under the circumstances was one of shame; and she would go therefore to find a humble home in some other part of the country, where she might bring her babe into the world. She had some little money left—she forced a part upon the old woman—but ere sh... ook her departure, she wrote to ...ndlord of the cottage to inti- ... that she could no longer keep ... nd then she went away."

...nes—O my beloved, my injured, ...ged Agnes!" moaned the ...Normanton, in the depth of .... "Though many long, ... have elapsed since, then," he added vehemently, and with a sudden rage in his looks, "I can curse that vile uncle of mine who wrought all this mischief!"

"Curse not the dead, great though his misdeeds were!" interposed Mr Johnson, solemnly.

"No, no—I will not curse!" said the Earl, whose grief now took the place of the deepest humiliation. "But I may weep—O I may weep for my unfortunate Agnes! Sweet persecuted girl," he murmured, in a voice broken with sobs, "thou didst suffer so much upon earth, there can be no doubt thou art now an angel in heaven: for it were hoping in despair's despite that thou, poor shattered spirit—beautiful but blighted flower—art yet alive!"

There was something indescribably mournful and most touchingly pathetic in the words, the looks, and the manner of that nobleman whose wonted demeanour was one of cold severity, and whose general aspect seemed to indicate the impossibility of being thus melted by such potent feelings. Mr. Johnson hastily swept his hand across his eyes; and Hodgson—whose soul might have been supposed to be warped, tanned, hardened, petrified, by long immurement amidst the reckless debaucheries and callous dissipations of a gaol—was himself profoundly touched.

"And this is all?" said the nobleman, after a long pause. "This is all that you can tell me of my lost—my beautiful—my murdered Agnes?"

"No, my lord—not all," replied the old man.

"Not all?" ejaculated Normanton, with a galvanic start, and with

a vivid resuscitation of his former fevered suspense. "Not all? Then, for heaven's sake speak!"

"My lord," continued Hodgson, "the most important part of my revelation is yet to come. Months passed away after Agnes left the cottage—eight or nine months, as well as the old woman could recollect—and in the meanwhile that elderly gentleman had become its occupant. One evening, as the old woman was returning from the neighbouring farm-house, whither she had been to purchase a few necessaries for the little establishment—and in the gloom of twilight, she suddenly beheld a figure stand before her. She fell down senseless; for she was smitten with the conviction that it was the spirit of Agnes. When she came back to consciousness, she was lying upon a bank, her head supported in the arms of Agnes: for the living Agnes it indeed was——but oh, so pale—so altered—so thin—so wasted—and yet with such a wild look too—Pardon me, my lord,—I see that I distress you!"

"It is driving me mad!" moaned the Earl of Normanton: but again exercising an almost supernatural control over his feelings, he said, in a hoarse gasping voice, "Go on—go on."

"Even through the gloom of twilight," proceeded Hodgson, "could the old woman distinguish the wan faded appearance and the wild look of Agnes: for as she expressed herself to me on her death-bed, her vision had a horrible clearness on that memorable evening. And now, my lord, I beseech you to prepare yourself to hear the saddest part of this most mournful history. Agnes told the old woman that six months had elapsed since she had become a mother in some obscure place, where she had passed under a fictitious name——"

"And the child?" said the Earl of Normanton, leaning forward with a sudden start, and clutching Hodgson forcibly by the wrist.

"The boy, my lord," continued the old clergyman,—"for it was a son of whom Agnes had become a parent——"

"Oh, my son! my child!—what of him?" demanded the Earl with frenzied quickness of speech and with wildest look.

"Ah, my lord, I never can tell you—I never can reveal the truth——"

"He died?—say that the child died?" exclaimed the nobleman, almost fiercely. "Tell me that the poor innocent babe perished—and perhaps *that* will be the truth!"

"No, my lord—it would be a falsehood," rejoined the clergyman; "and it is not a falsehood that you require from my lips. I beseech you to listen with as much patience as you can display."

"I will, I will! Go on:"—but Normanton could scarcely prevent the betrayal of a strong spasm of agony.

"The unfortunate Agnes proceeded to inform the old woman that abo[ut] six months had elapsed since she [be]came the mother of that child, w[hom] she had baptized by the nam[e of] Eugene Derwent.

"My own name!" groa[ned the] wretched Earl.

"But no father's name w[as] to be inscribed in the regi[ster]

little village church where the babe was christened," continued Mr. Hodgson; "and Agnes—pardon me, my lord, for continuing to call her thus familiarly; but I speak as if I were repeating the words as I received them from the lips of that dying woman——"

"Yes—call her Agnes," said the Earl: "there is a sad pleasure in hearing that name spoken! The very name itself appears to express all the beauty, the innocence, the amiability—" But as the nobleman's voice was well-nigh lost in sobs, he added, with quivering lips, "Go on!"

"Agnes told a piteous tale to the old woman," resumed Hodgson. "She said that for those six months she had nourished her babe—sometimes pressing it to her bosom with ineffable fondness—at others weeping over it in a state of distraction—until at length she felt that her brain was reeling—that she was going mad—and the horrible thought stole into her head that she would make away with her child——"

"Good God!" exclaimed the Earl with a wild and mournful cry. "And she did it?"

"No, my lord—she did *not*," responded the old clergyman, firmly,—"at least not in the sense that *you* mean. In a word, there came a moment when she feared that she could no longer wrestle against the ...ul thoughts that kept on gain... trength in her mind in propor... as her reason grew weak and ...ntellect dim; and she felt that ...der to save herself from the ...r of becoming a murderess—a ...icide—she must part from her ...d. And so she abandoned it."

"Abandoned it?—my God!" and the Earl appeared to be sinking back in his chair as if about to faint, when suddenly reviving with the keenest instinct of life, he said, "But where—where?"

"*That*, my lord, I know not," answered Mr. Hodgson: "for Agnes mentioned nothing of the circumstances to the old woman. All she said was that she had abandoned the child—that she had come rapidly away from the place where she had left him—that she had walked all that day from a very early hour in the morning—and that she scarcely knew why, but her wandering steps had instinctively as it were brought her back to the neighbourhood of the cottage which had once been her home. And then she talked with a soft plaintive vagueness of the babe whom she had abandoned; she spoke of its little cherub countenance—how sweetly it was sleeping at the time when she deposited it in some place where she hoped it would be found and taken care of; and in this strain she continued for some time. She asked the old woman whether any tidings had been received of your lordship: but the answer was given in the negative—and it was evident that it was only what the poor poor creature expected to receive. Then she began to talk of the child again: she praised its beauty,—she spoke as mothers do speak of their offspring; and amongst other things she stated that on its right arm, a little below the shoulder, it had three minute moles, so singularly placed as to form the points of whence the limes of a triangle might be drawn——"

"And I," said the Earl, "have exactly the same marks on my own right arm. Here!"—and he indicated the spot. "Oh, my child! my child! what has become of you? And what has become of thee too, Agnes, the unhappy mother of the abandoned one? But proceed, Mr. Hodgson: what else have you to say?"

"But little more, my lord," replied the old man: "and I fear that I have already said enough to wound you deeply. Agnes remained seated with the old woman upon the bank for nearly an hour; and if the faithful dependant sought to turn the conversation into some channel which might lead to the discovery of where Agnes had left the child, the poor young lady immediately flew to another topic: for, alas! my lord, there can be no doubt that care and anguish had turned her brain. But she spoke much of you! and it was at this interview with the old woman that she told her many things that she had never touched upon before relative to your connexion, and your marriage in Scotland, and the letter which she had received from Lord Tylden: for if my memory serves me right, it was not until this occasion of which I am speaking that the old woman ever knew your real name and rank. All of a sudden Agnes started up from her seat by the old woman's side; and bidding her be there again at that very same place on the ensuing evening, she hurried away—her aerial form being almost instantaneously lost in the surrounding darkness of the hour."

"And she kept the appointment? said the Earl, hastily.

"No, my lord—the old woman never saw her more! Evening after evening for some weeks she went to that place and at the same hour, in the hope that Agnes would come; but she came not. All this was a lucid interval for the old woman in the midst of her dotage; and then she relapsed into her dotage again,—having but a dim recollection of what had taken place, and looking upon it only as a mere vision. She breathed not a syllable to the elderly gentleman her master; and the next incident which at all broke in upon the senile tenour of her existence, was your lordship's sudden appearance some months afterwards at the cottage."

"Yes," exclaimed the Earl; "that was when I was liberated from the mad-house!"

"But unfortunately, my lord," continued Hodgson, "the old woman had conceived the deepest, deepest antipathy against you: she looked upon you as the author of all her dear young lady's unhappiness—she believed not the tale you told her to account for your long absence—she thought it was an excuse for a wilfully criminal desertion, and that your affliction *then* was the result of a remorse too late awakened. Her mood was therefore one of sullen, dogged, obstinate silence; and she would tell you nothing. You went away--and it was two or three [illegible] afterwards that the old woman [illegible] stretched upon that death-bed to[illegible] side of which I was summ[illegible] to hear all that I am now relati[illegible] your lordship. Then it was tha[illegible] death drew near unto that a[illegible] creature, the long feeble flicker[illegible]

lamp of her intellect flamed up for a brief space—she recovered the power of her reason—she no longer regarded her interview with Agnes as a vision—she no longer disbelieved the tale which your lordship had told her of an eighteen months' incarceration in a mad-house! She saw how wrong she had been in keeping back from you whatsoever she knew concerning the ill-fated Agnes; and she revealed everything to me in order that I might, if an opportunity served, repeat the narrative to your lordship's ears. And before morning the old woman was a corpse."

"Oh, and why did you not come to me?" exclaimed the Earl, with a passionate outburst of feeling. "I might have sought for my child, though fruitless had been my search for Agnes!"

"I *did* call upon your lordship, at your father's mansion in London. I learnt that you were absent from home, and that it was uncertain when you would return. I said that I would call again, and hinted that I had some communication of importance to make: but the domestic to whom I spoke entreated me that if it were anything unpleasant, I would forbear from revealing it to you—for that your lordship had seen so much trouble of late that it was feared you would go really mad. I went away: my extravagances had already involved me in ruin—I was tracked by creditors to London—I fled to a port—and thence embarked for the West Indies, where I had a brother who I thought would receive me with open arms. I arrived in Jamaica the very day after he had been consigned to the tomb. I obtained some employment there; but at the expiration of a few years returned to England,—where, to be brief, I became involved in fresh troubles; and the last ten years of my existence have been spent in a debtor's gaol. Two or three times the thought occurred to me that I would write to your lordship: but so long a period had elapsed since the occurrences in which you were interested, that I apprehended the interest itself might have worn off——"

"No—never, never!" exclaimed the Earl, vehemently. But, Oh! if my son should yet live—if I should be enable to trace him out and establish his identity——But the name of the village where he was baptized? Quick! what is it?"

"Ah! my lord, Agnes mentioned it not to the old woman," replied Hodgson: "but it could have been at no very great distance——"

"No—because the poor creature had retraced her way to the neighbourhood of that cottage since an early hour of the morning of the same day!"

The Earl of Normanton rose from his seat as he gave utterance to these words; and for a minute or two he paced to and fro in the apartment with agitated manner and uneven steps.

"My dear Johnson," he said, at length stopping abrupty and addressing himself to the attorney, "not a syllable of all that has transpired here this evening must be mentioned elsewhere. Mr. Hodgson, I rely upon your secrecy. If I find my son—my poor deserted child—there will be no longer need for silence: but if I be doomed to disappointment, then will it

indeed be unnecessary to proclaim to the world the causes of my continued grief. Johnson, I leave London to-morrow morning: do everything that is needful for Mr. Hodgson's comfort —place him in some respectable abode—give him money—stint it not! I now take my departure. Make my excuses to those in the drawing-room—I cannot see them again to-night—my feelings overpower me. Say that some sudden business—— But you will know how to offer an apology——And now farewell!"

With these words the Earl of Normanton, who was deeply and painfully excited, was about to hurry from the room—when suddenly recollecting something, he hastily whispered to the attorney, "Ruthven knows my sad story—tell him that I have seen Hodgson—but give him not the details of what I have learnt. It shall be reserved for my lips to explain everything to him at a suitable opportunity."

The nobleman then quitted the room, and sped back on foot to his own mansion,—where, shutting himself up in the library, he gave vent to his feelings with lavished kisses and torrents of tears poured out upon the auburn tress.

CHAPTER XLIII.

THE HEART'S FEELINGS.

The party was over—the guests were gone—and May Middleton had retired to her chamber in the hospitable lawyer's house. She endeavoured to review with calmness the little incidents of the previous few hours: but there was so strange a fluttering at her heart that she could not settle her thoughts to deliberate reflection.

How was it that this Francis Pelham had made such an impression upon her? how was it that after he first entered the drawing-room she felt disappointed, if not actually hurt that his manner had not been more cordial to her father and herself? She knew nothing of that warm pressure of the hand which had taken place between her sire and Mr. Pelham at the dessert-table after the ladies had quitted the dining-room; and thus she remained in the belief that there was a certain degree of constraint and coldness on Pelham's part towards herself and father. Again, how was it that when the gentlemen—with the exception of the Earl of Normanton—rejoined the ladies in the drawing-room, May experienced a strange and unaccountable feeling on perceiving that Mr Pelham's attentions were altogether bestowed upon Josephine Ruthven? Was it jealousy—was it envy on our heroine's part? Surely the amiable and high-minded May was incapable of such meanness—such pettiness? And yet, whence this sense of disappointment—annoyance—vexation—or whatever it might be, at the circumstance that Mr. Pelham had directed none of his conversation to herself?

May was restless and uneasy—almost unhappy. Dimly the suspicion arose in her mind that her hea[rt] was touched by the elegant and wel[l]-mannered young gentleman who[se] discourse was so interesting, witho[ut] the slightest tinge of egotism, a[nd] the treasures of whose wel[l]-ve[ined] intellect had been displayed

pedantry or ostentation. But, oh! was she proving faithless to the hitherto cherished image of Reuben Wallis? —was she forgetting her vows to make him an atonement for the past if he could still be in the land of the living and should come to claim it at her hand? These questions Miss Middleton failed not to ask herself; and with a mighty effort she strove to banish Francis Pelham from her memory:—but she could not!

On the following day, at about two in the afternoon—when May was seated in the drawing-room with Mrs. Johnson, her father being out, and the lawyer at his office—the door was thrown open and Mr. Pelham was announced. May felt her colour going and coming in rapid transition upon her cheeks—while her heart fluttered like a bird newly imprisoned in a cage. The visitor first gave his hand to Mrs. Johnson—and then turning to May, proffered his hand to her likewise. She took it: her own trembled in that clasp: and not daring to meet Mr. Pelham's looks—for she was most keenly sensible of her confusion—her eyes were bent downward. The next moment he, with well-bred ease, had taken a chair, and was already gliding into a discourse upon the leading topics of the day. The tones of his voice—full of a rich masculine harmony, but ...ightly permeated with a mournful ...s—appeared to thrill strangely ...gh her; and when she at length ...red to turn her eyes upon him, ...und that his looks were fixed ...ier countenance—and so her ...gards were immediately bent ...gain.

Pelham addressed his conversation as much to May as to Mrs. Johnson; but our heroine felt a difficulty in joining it—a difficulty which for a long time past she had not experienced. She caught her thoughts wandering to other scenes and subjects, wherein the image of Reuben Wallis appeared continuously to figure: so that on three or four occasions during Pelham's visit, she fancied that it was Reuben himself who was there present and discoursing,—until starting with a wild inward joy at the idea, she flung her looks upon the visitor, when the appearance of that well-bred young gentleman, with the polished manners and the fund of anecdote—and likewise with the long hair shading a part of his countenance, and the moustache and beard completely concealing, so to speak, the other part—at once made her sensible of the illusion.

Mr. Pelham took his departure, having promised to call in the evening of the following day and accompany the ladies to the theatre. May at once retired to her chamber: for she felt the necessity of being by herself to compose her feelings and to analyse, if possible, the thoughts which had been excited by the visit of Francis Pelham. When she again returned to the drawing—room, her father, as well as Mr. and Mrs. Johnson were there; she consequently found herself compelled as much as possible to avoid falling into preoccupation or reverie.

But the evening appeared to her one of the longest she had ever passed in her life; and it was impossible for her to disguise from herself the

fact that she had missed something to render that evening agreeable—and that this something was the presence of Francis Pelham.

In the evening of the following day, our heroine accompanied Mrs. Johnson, her father, and Mr. Pelham to the theatre: the lawyer did not join them, as he seldom visited places of public entertainment. It happened that in the very next box which our party occupied, General Ruthven and Josephine were seated; and May Middleton experienced a sort of pang shooting through her heart when she heard Francis and the General's daughter call each other by their Christian names. Immediately afterwards Pelham had occasion to address May herself; and the term "Miss Middleton" struck her as coldly formal indeed, in contrast with that more friendly and familiar term of "Josephine" which was addressed to Miss Ruthven. And yet a moment's reflection, enabling all May's good sense to assert itself, told her how impossible it was—and indeed how rude and impertinent it would be—for Mr. Pelham to place himself on the same degree of intimacy towards her as that on which he stood with regard to Josephine.

"He has known me but for three days," said May to herself, "and he has known Miss Ruthven for as many years. Perhaps too——"

But the words which our heroine was about to speak inwardly, were stifled by a strong effort,—the very effort itself convincing her that she dared not contemplate the probability which her imagination was uggesting.

The evening passed; and though May had not the slightest reason to complain of any inattention on Mr. Pelham's part, she nevertheless could not help reflecting, when once more alone in her own chamber, that he had chatted with Miss Ruthven in a more friendly and familiar manner than with herself. But to do our heroine justice, it must be observed that not for a single moment did she feel any diminution of the affectionate friendship she experienced for Josephine, and therefore whatever her sentiments might be in respect to Pelham, she in reality entertained no mean or vulgar jealousy on account of the General's daughter.

Five or six weeks passed away; and Pelham called every afternoon at the lawyer's abode. During this interval his own demeanour became perceptibly more and more friendly towards May: or in other words, it gradiently put off that cold formality which necessarily hangs about the first period of acquaintanceship—and it assumed the air which implied a wish that this acquaintanceship may ripen into friendship. But our heroine could not divest herself of the confusion of manner as well as of thoughts which Pelham's presence invariably excited; and it seemed to her as if her hallucinations and illusions grew upon her more and more, and that she was all the more frequently identifying Francis Pelh[...] with the image of the long lc[...] perhaps perished Reuben Wal[...]

One day, when she was alo[...] her father in the drawing-r[...] the lawyer's house,—Mr. M[...] laying down the newspap[...]

"Well, May, what do you think of our friend Mr. Pelham?"

"What do *you* think of him, father?" inquired our heroine, dropping her embroidery and picking it up again.

"The more I see of him, the better I like him," was the response. He is a trifle shy and distant: several times I have endeavoured to draw him into conversation—but he has either bent down over a book, or else flown to speak to some one else; and yet I am certain that he does not dislike me on account of my being the uncle of Wilfrid—for he invariably presses my hand with warmth. But what do you think of him, May?"

"Everyone must admit," answered our heroine, without looking up from her embroidery, "that he is a very agreeable young gentleman: and he has travelled much—he has seen a great deal of the world—he has mixed in the first society ——"

"No doubt of it," observed Mr. Middleton; "because, as Mr. Johnson has informed me, he went abroad with letters of introduction from the Earl of Normanton and General Ruthven to our ambassadors at foreign courts; so that he at once found himself in the highest circles at whatever capital he visited. It is strange—but there is something about that young man which, every time I see him, leaves upon me the impression that I must have known him before in some other place——"

"How singular!" interrupted May: "but the same thought has fitted through my own mind——yes, often often!"

"And yet it is impossible," resumed the farmer: "for where else could we have met him if not down in Leicestershire?—and when I caught him by the button hole yesterday, and asked him if he had ever been in Leicestershire, especially in the neighbourhood of Burnside—he flung upon me so strange a look that I really thought for the moment I had offended him. Just at that instant the Ruthvens were announced; and he hurried to shake them by the hand—so that he gave me no answer."

"He is very intimate with General and Miss Ruthven," observed May: and now her head was bent lower down than ever over her embroidery.

"Intimate indeed!" ejaculated Mr. Middleton: "and no wonder? Why, where are your eyes, May? One would have thought that a woman would be the very first to discover—How awkward you are, my dear girl, this morning! That is the second or third time you have let your embroidery drop."

May murmured something as she stooped to pick it up; and if her father had been a little more observant, he could not possibly have failed to perceive that his daughter's countenance—aye, and even her very neck down to her bosom was suffused with a deep blush.

"Well," continued Mr. Middleton, "as your own eyes have not told you the secret, I see that my lips must reveal it. There is no longer any necessity to keep silent—Johnson told me so last evening when we were over our wine together. The truth is, there will be a wedding soon; and I have promised that you

shall officiate as one of the bridesmaids. There! down goes the embroidery again!"

Yes: but this time no blush crimsoned May's countenance nor suffused itself upon her neck. She felt as if she had been smitten a sudden blow—and yet a blow which she had more or less foreseen though she would never until now admit it to herself. Her father's words were alike a confirmation and a revelation: they confirmed all the vague fears which she had entertained in respect to the significancy of that intimacy which existed between Francis Pelham and Josephine Ruthven; and they revealed to May the state of her own heart beyond the possibility of further uncertainty or doubt. She loved Francis Pelham; and she felt as if her sire's words had dealt a death-blow to some hope she had been entertaining, but which was never fully comprehended until now.

She had not time to recover from the shock which that revelation had caused her to experience, when the door was thrown open and Mr. Pelham was announced. Farmer Middleton grasped his hand warmly—for he was irresistibly attracted, as if by some unknown spell, towards that young gentleman; and May exerting all her energy to appear calm and collected, proffered her own hand in her turn. Yet, despite all her efforts, it trembled more than ever in Pelham's clasp—while Pelham himself held it longer than he had ever done before. "We were just speaking of you," said Mr. Middleton. "I was telling my daughter a little secret——"

"A secret, my dear sir?" ejaculated Francis, qrickly. "Yes, to be sure!" responded the farmer, with a good-natured smile. "I was telling May that there would be a bridal shortly, and that she must officiate as one of Miss Ruthven's bridesmaids ——But, Ah! what is this?"

The ejaculation with which the farmer suddenly broke off, was caused by the swift dashing of some equipage up to the front of the lawyer's house: indeed at such a violent rate did the four horses come tearing along the street, that it was no wonder Mr. Middleton's curiosity should be thus excited. He hastened to the window, and gazed forth. He did not, therefore, perceive that his daughter, utterly unable to control her feelings, had sunk back in her chair—not in a swoon—but as pale as death, and feeling as if she must give way to some hysterical transport of grief, strong-minded though she habitually was. The next instant Pelham was bending over her; and in a voice so low that it was only just audible, he said, "For heaven's sake, what is the matter, Miss Middleton? Are you ill?"

"No—a passing indisposition—it is gone," replied May: and it was now with a successful effort—though one which cost her a world of agony to exert it—that she sat up properly in her chair; and with a sweet melancholy smile she thanked Mr. Pelham for his kind attention.

"It is the Earl of Normanton," ejaculated Mr. Middleton: "he literally rushes out of his travelling carriage——Ah! and there is Johnson who comes up at the mo[illegible] and catches him by the arm[illegible]

can possibly agitate the Earl thus?—for agitated and excited he assuredly is!"

The farmer turned away from the window: his daughter had just resumed her embroidery—but heaven knows with what an utter inability to work at it: Francis Pelham was bending over a portfolio of prints that lay upon the table. The door suddenly opened; and a domestic who entered, addressing himself to Mr. Middleton, said, "If you please, sir, will you have the kindness to step down stairs? My master and the Earl of Normanton are waiting to see you immediately?"

"To be sure!" ejaculated Mr. Middleten: and wondering what it could possibly mean, he hastily followed the livery-servant from the room.

It was evident that Francis Pelham and May were each too much occupied with their own thoughts to bestow more than a transient notice on the little incident which had thus summoned the farmer from the apartment; and the reader may imagine that the reflections of the young gentleman must have been all absorbing indeed, to render him thus indifferent and callous to the return of so kind a friend as the Earl of Normanton had proved towards him. But the fact is, that Francis Pelham had scarcely heard Farmer Middleton's ejaculations at the window—and had only a dim and vague idea of the nature of the message just delivered by the footman. It was the same too with May Middleton—so deeply preoccupied were they both in their own thoughts!

And now they were left alone together. May exerted all her moral strength—all her mental power—to retain her composure. She felt that it was her duty—a duty to herself—a duty to the dignity and propriety of her sex—a duty towards this young gentleman, who, as she had just been told, was engaged to another—and a duty towards the absent Josephine, whom she regarded as the object of Pelham's love. And in the hope of strengthening her mind to a becoming standard, May summoned up the image of Reuben Wallis: but, O strange! why was this hallucination ever returning? why was that illusion ever coming back?—for *again* did it seem as if the image of the long-lost and perhaps perished Reuben was identifying itself with Francis Pelham who was present in that room!

"Miss Middleton," said the low voice of masculine harmony which was never heard by her without a strange and incomprehensible thrill,—"Miss Middleton," said Pelham, advancing from the table and taking a chair by her side, "I hope you feel better now. You were seized with indisposition——"

"It is not worth while to allude to it," answered May, softly and sweetly: "it is now past and gone—"

"Yes—but it grieved me sorely, sorely," interrupted Pelham——"No, not grieved me—it gladdened, it gladdened me!"

"Mr. Pelham!" ejaculated May with a sudden start: for those words did indeed sound wildly incongruous to her ears.

"Yes—it gladdened me!" he continued—and his voice swelled as

if in exultation. "Oh, you must listen to me—yes, you must listen to me *now*."

May gazed upon him in mingled consternation and wonderment. She had never looked so closely in his face before: she now caught the expression of his eyes—strange thoughts, seemingly as wild as his own words, swept in unto her brain —she felt as if she were standing on the threshold of the solution of some extraordinary mystery.

"Yes, Miss Middleton," continued Francis, "I was gladdened, because in a moment I read that secret of your heart which is fraught with a word of hope for me! O May, dearest May —could you believe for an instant that I loved another? To me Josephine Ruthven stands only in the light of a dear friend or a sister—as I myself am regarded by her as a brother. But it is you, May—*you*; dearest, dearest, whom I love and whose hand I claim!"

While Francis Pelham was thus speaking with rapid and impassioned utterance, those strange wild thoughts grew stranger and wilder still in the brain of our heroine. It appeared as if all that she had regarded as an hallucination was none—all that she had looked upon as an illusion might possibly be realized! —nay, more, that this realization was already taking place before her eyes, and all that she could distinguish of Francis Pelham's countenance went on identifying itself more and more with *another* image that was in her mind. She felt half frightened: her sensation was one as if something might occur to realize a dream of happiness that had hitherto been floating so vaguely in her mind as not to be thoroughly understood—but that now when it was at length comprehended, and setting itself into shape and substance, she might waken to find it only a dream and an illusion still!

Suddenly the door opened; and the domestic, reappearing, said, "Mr. Pelham, you are wanted, sir, immediately in the library!"

Francis flung upon May a look which was as much as to entreat her to remain there, for that he would fly back to her as quickly as possible; and as the footman lingered, holding the door open, the young gentleman was constrained to issue forth at once. The door closed behind himself and the domestic; and May was now alone. Oh! what a tumult of thoughts—what a perfect whirl of ideas agitated in her brain! what ineffable emotions heaved in her heart! Joy and suspense—hope and fear—love and alarm—anxiety and painful pleasure, were all blended in this confusion of thoughts and of feelings. It was an agitation and excitement which must have a speedy issue, or the effects would be overpowering. And if not the *one* issue which in a certain sense she hoped, and in another sense she scarcely dared hope—an issue realizing all that ever seemed wildest and most improbable in the pages of romance —if not *this* issue, we say, then what was to become of her?

But, Ah! the door again suddenly opened; and a group appeared upon the threshold. May started up from her seat with dizzy brain and half-dimmed vision; but yet she thought she could distinguish those who

entered. Foremost was the Earl of Normanton, leaning on the arm of Francis Pelham: then came Mr. Middleton and Mrs. Johnson—next the lawyer with Josephine Ruthven—and the General in the rear. And it struck May, too, that all these countenances were radiant with animation; she felt as if she were in a dream. She passed her hand across her eyes; with one strong effort she recovered her self-possession at the same instant that she saw clearly likewise.

"Dearest Miss Middleten," said the Earl of Normanton, whose voice was tremulous with ineffable emotions, "congratulate me—I am sure you will—I have discovered one who is nearest and dearest to me upon earth—my son—my hitherto lost son, Viscount Derwent!"

Our heroine turned her looks in bewildered amazement upon Francis Pelham—for he it was to whom the Earl of Normanton thus alluded, as his fond paternal looks full well displayed.

"Yes—but the ever faithful Reuben Wallis to *you*, dearest May!" exclaimed the young Viscount, springing forward; and with a cry of joy our heroine sank upon his breast.

CHAPTER XLIV.

EXPLANATIONS.

It will not require many paragraphs to explain how the Earl of Normanton discovered that the young man who has passed in this history by the names of Reuben Wallis and Francis Pelham, was his own son—the offspring of the loved, the hapless and long-lost Agnes.

The reader will remember that immediately after the interview with Mr. Hodgson at Mr. Johnson's house, the nobleman determined on leaving the metropolis; and this was for the purpose of instituting inquiries with a hope of discovering, if possible, some clue to the fate of that child whom Agnes, in the half-crazed wilderment of her brain, had abandoned six months after its birth. Leicestershire was the county where the nobleman and Agnes Markland had first known each other—the county in which was situated the town where he was at school, and in whose neighbourhood was also the cottage where Agnes had dwelt. From the details of Mr. Hodgson's narrative it was to be presumed that the child had been abandoned at no considerable distance from that cottage; and the presumption likewise was that Agnes had previously found a refuge somewhere in the same district at the time she became a mother. It was tolerably clear that her infant had been baptized; and therefore on speeding into Leicestershire after having received Mr. Hodgson's explanations, the Earl began visiting all the villages and hamlets where there were churches, in order to consult the registers. He inserted advertisements likewise in the single local newspaper which was published in Leicestershire in those days,—offering a reward to any parish-clerk who could furnish him with the required information. As the reader has seen, several weeks passed during which the Earl of Normanton remained absent from the metropolis, and during which time also he was unweariedly prose-

cuting his inquiries. At length he succeeded in discovering the particular registry which he sought, and which was at an obscure village many miles further from the cottage than he had anticipated—and, we may as well observe, about thirty miles from Burnside Farm.

Yes—there was the registry of the birth of Eugene Derwent,—the unhappy mother's name figuring as Agnes Derwent, but without the appendage of the title of Viscountess which at the time rightfully belonged to her. We will not pause to describe the Earl's feelings on perusing this entry of twenty-three years back in the baptismal register of that humble village church: suffice it to say that he wept profusely over it; and having procured a certificate, he strenuously and unweariedly pursued his inquiries, with a view of ascertaining if possible the fate of that child whose existence was thus demonstrated. In due course he reached the neighbourhood of Burnside; and there he learnt something which suddenly inspired him with the most sanguine hope. Yes—in answer to his inquiries he was informed that between twenty-two and twenty-three years back a child had been abandoned in that neighbourhood, and had been brought up, under the name of Reuben Wallis, by Farmer Middleton—the very gentleman to whom the Earl had a few weeks previously been introduced at Mr. Johnson's house in London!! The nobleman proceeded to the cottage occupied by Giles Wallis, the son of the man who so many years before had discovered the infant in the barn upon the Burnside estate; but from that individual he gleaned only that much which has been all along known to the reader. It may easily be supposed that the first eager and anxious question which the Earl put was whether the babe had three peculiarly placed moles on the right arm? But upon this point Giles could give no information.

From farther conversation which took place with Giles, the Earl was more or less led to suspect that Francis Pelham—towards whom he had experienced a certain yearning—was identical with Reuben Wallis, whom he had every reason to believe his own son. He flew to London as fast as lavished gold could induce postillions to urge their horses on; and, as we have seen he reached the lawyer's house just at the instant when this gentleman himself was returning from his office, and when Francis Pelham was with Mr. Middleton and May in the drawing-room. To the solicitor everything was quickly communicated by the anxious and excited Earl; and Mr. Johnson was enabled at once to inform his lordship that Francis Pelham and Reuben Wallis were one and the same person. Then, as we have seen, Mr. Middleton was hastily summoned from the drawing-room into the presence of the nobleman and the attorney; and to the very first question which was put to him the worthy farmer was enabled to [illegible] that the Reuben Wallis whom he [illegible] brought up, had upon the righ[illegible] three very small moles placed [illegible] peculiar manner that was desc[illegible] This was sufficient: the Ear[illegible] found his son—there was no [illegible]

the slightest suspense or uncertainty—and the young man was quickly summoned from the drawing-room to be folded in the arms of a fond enraptured father, and to hear the wildly wondrous announcement that he was neither the obscure Reuben Wallis nor the fictitiously named Francis Pelham any longer—but that he was the Lord Viscount Derwent! General Ruthven and Josephine happened to call at the time; and they thus became the deeply moved and interested witnesses of a father's and son's affectionate and grateful rejoicings.

We now proceed to clear up certain mysteries which have hitherto invested the career of our hero from the time that he suddenly disappeared from the farm at Burnside four years previous to the date of which we are writing. It will be remembered that in one of the earliest chapters of our tale, we described how Reuben Wallis (as he was then named) sought on a particular occasion a white rose which May held in her hand. She coquettishly refused him the flower; and she unconsciously dropped it a moment afterwards on the appearance of a handsome and well-dressed young gentleman, who proved to be her cousin Wilfrid. Of that rose Reuben took possession, and placed it next his heart.

Wilfrid's conduct to Reuben Wallis was slighting, scornful, and distant; and old George Middleton—then an inmate of Burnside under the name of Darnley—took pity upon Reuben. He became sensible of his good qualities—discovered likewise his love for May—knew that it was sanctioned by her father—but feared that it was not reciprocated by the maiden herself. He urged Reuben, as the reader will recollect, to obtain a decision from May's lips; and this decision seemed fatal to the young man's hopes. But old George Middleton had already seen enough of his nephew Wilfrid to be convinced that he was not of a character nor of a disposition to ensure the happiness of May Middleton; and perhaps the old man had already partially revolved, if not actually settled in his mind, the plans which he subsequently laid for the realization of Reuben's hopes and the assurance of May's welfare. He had a secret interview with Reuben after he had obtained the decision from May's lips; and what he said to the young man may be summed up in the following terms:—

"Burnside Farm is no longer a home for you: you must leave it, to go forth into the world and pursue a career different from your past one. Here are a few pounds to take you to London; and here is a letter which you will deliver to my solicitor, Mr. Johnson, who will explain to you what my immediate views and intentions are. You are a good young man: I have had an opportunity of testing the excellence of your qualities: you have been kind, attentive, and respectful towards me, without harbouring interested motives; and you have therefore made me your friend. You will find, on your arrival in London, that I am acting as such, and that your future welfare has now become one of the objects which I have in view. Depart! Leave behind you some letter that may more or less account for your disappearance

—follow faithfully the instructions—which Mr. Johnson will give you—and perhaps some years hence your happiness will be still more complete than you can now anticipate or than I dare venture to predict."

And Reuben Wallis departed. He reached London—he waited upon Mr. Johnson—he delivered the letter—it was a very long one—and when the lawyer had perused it, he addressed Reuben in the following terms:—

"Your benefactor has conceived certain designs and has laid down particular instructions which it remains with you to carry out. Beneath your somewhat rough exterior he has discovered a capacity for refinement and a susceptibility for that polish of both mind and manners which may enable you to fill a higher position than the one you have as yet occupied in the world. You will abandon your present name and take that of Francis Pelham. You will travel alike in this country and abroad: you will mix in society—you will see the world—you will study its refined usages and polite customs—you will also store your mind with the knowledge which is to be derived from books: in a word, you will keep incessantly before your eyes the idea that henceforth you occupy the position of a gentleman. Mr. Darnley has empowered me to make you a quarterly allowance of one hundred pounds, beginning from this day. But he solemnly enjoins you, through me, to keep everything which is now being done most religiously secret. You are never to speak of the past—you are to pursue a new career—and you will not allude to me as your solicitor nor even as an acquaintance, until such time as I may think fit to recall this portion of my injunctions. But from time to time you will communicate with me: you will regard me as your friend—you will never hesitate to seek my counsel when you require it."

Under such auspices was it that Reuben Wallis, transformed into Francis Pelham, went forth into the world. While pursuing his new career, he constantly thought of May, and often and often kissed the white rose which, though faded, he cherished as the choicest of treasures. Time passed on: he learnt from Mr. Johnson how iniquitously Wilfrid had behaved towards May in suing for her hand notwithstanding he had a wife still alive; and hope began to whisper though faintly, in the ears of Francis Pelham. Then he learnt how his benefactor, Mr. Darnley was none other than George Middleton, May's own uncle; and hope now spoke in a voice that was clearer and more audible still. He heard of his benefactor's death at Apsley Court: and though forbidden to appear upon the scene, he could not prevent himself from proceeding into Leicestershire and stealthily and secretly visiting the tomb to which the remains of that benefactor had been consigned. Being in the neighbourhood, Francis Pelham was unable to resist the temptation of wandering in the evening around the exterior of that mansion which was now May's own: and he was in the grounds belonging to Apsley Court when Wilfrid Middleton sought a last interview with our heroine. Francis listened: who would blame him for doing so?—he felt as if his only hope of happiness or elsee his doom to utter misery was now to be sealed. He heard Wilfrid ask May whether the love with which he had previously inspired her was dead in her heart for ever?—and with an ineffable thrill of joy, Francis Pelham likewise caught the emphatically uttered affirmativ response. Then he had an opportunity of delivering M[illegible] the violence of Wilfrid Midd[illegible] and, as the reader saw at the [illegible] Francis confided her to the car[illegible] domestic and disappeared w[illegible] being recognised.

A few months afterwards oc[illegible] those incidents in London in [illegible] Pelham was mixed up, and [illegible] have been so elaborately deta[illegible]

spect thereto, it may be observed that when the magisterial investigation into the case of the loaded dice was being conducted at Wilfrid's lodgings, Francis Pelham only too faithfully adhered to Mr. Johnson's injunctions, not to name him as his solicitor nor to explain the source whence his income was derived. But when, on the following day, Mr. Johnson learnt all that had thus occurred, he saw the inconvenience of keeping the young man's lips sealed in respect to those explanations which constituted the chief guarantee of his respectability; and the worthy solicitor accordingly relaxed the severity of his injunctions to a sufficient extent to obviate this inconvenience for the future. From that moment Francis Pelham became an acknowledged acquaintance—we should rather say friend of Mr. Johnson.

It was shortly after the incidents of the dice that General Ruthven determined to sound Francis Pelham in respect to the feeling which he might entertain towards Josephine: for the veteran had cherished the idea of bestowing his beloved daughter upon a man whom he regarded as in every way qualified to ensure her happiness. But Francis Pelham frankly admitted to the General that his affections were already engaged, though he named not the object. Ruthven was accordingly compelled to abandon the hope which he had thus entertained: but from some little circumstances he suspected that Josephine was conceiving an attachment towards Francis; the General therefore delicately but unmistakably gave his daughter to understand that their youthful visitor's heart cherished the image of some unknown one. The amiable Josephine's feelings received a shock: but she exerted the strength of mind to enable her henceforth to regard Francis only as a friend or as a brother; and shortly afterwards he quitted England. During the long interval of two years and some months which now elapsed, the gentle maiden was enabled, by aid of the mingled delicacy and dignity of her mind, to triumph completely over that nascent affection which, fortunately for her peace, had not taken so deep a root in her heart as to be ineradicable. Thus, when our hero returned to the metropolis after his long absence, Josephine was enabled to welcome him with the unembarrassed cordiality and the frank amiable familiarity of a sister towards a brother.

George Middleton had not failed, during his interviews with Mr. Johnson at Apsley Court, to develop his views completely in respect to Francis Pelham and May; the lawyer was thus enabled, after the old man's death, to further those views to the best of his ability. When May's majority was approaching, Mr. Johnson wrote to summon Pelham from abroad; and he devised a pretext for inviting Farmer Middleton and our heroine to stay at his house in London. Francis came back bearded and moustached, according to the Continental fashion which was then prevailing; and this circumstance tended materially to aid the carrying-out of the lawyer's plan. Nor did he now any longer conceal it from Pelham himself; but explained it—thereby raising our hero's hopes to the most ecstatic pitch.

"You are so improved in every sense," added the attorney, "and so altered as well as disguised in your personal appearance, that neither Mr. Middleton nor May will recognise you. You must try and win the young lady's heart as *Francis Pelham*; and I will be bound that as such you will be more successful than you were as *Reuben Wallis*."

Every circumstance, as the reader has seen, favoured the plan: for the intimacy of Francis with Josephine Ruthven made it appear to May—without any study on his own part to produce this effect—as if they were

lovers and engaged to be united. The noblest natures are susceptible of jealousy; and May was not an exception to the common rule. We have seen how her feelings were piqued while labouring under a natural but erroneous impression in respect to Ruthven; and the lawyer took care to advance matters after his own fashion by whispering to Mr. Middleton that there would shortly be a wedding and that May should be one of the bridesmaids. The whole plan succeeded: the love which May had for a long time been cherishing for the lost Reuben was reflected towards Francis—it was the heart's own dimly comprehended tribute of faithful affection towards the lost one—and now the young man appeared neither as the obscure Reuben Wallis nor as the mysterious Francis Pelham—but as the son of a peer, and himself the Viscount Derwent!

And was not May happy now?—was she not overwhelmed with surprise and joy at all the wondrous things she had to learn?—or could she fail to be struck at the fidelity with which every portion of the gipsy's prophecy had now received its fulfilment, especially that which had so often and often bewildered her as to the possible means of its accomplishment:—

"Here, amidst this varied tracing,
Entertwining—interlacing—
I discern the soft revealings
Of the bosom's tenderest feelings!
Here is the passion that blighted must prove—
Here is the friendship shall ripen to love:
While regrets for the worthless are passing away,
Here's the true feeling that ever shall stay.
Mystic tracing—tangled web,
That speaks of love's flow as well as its ebb;
The tale thou revealest is drawn from the past—
And thou, gentle maid, shall happy at last!
When upon thee dawns the light—
When thou readest thy heart aright—
When the lustre that dazzled awhile shall wane,
And the first true feeling alone remain,—
Then the wanderer over the world so wide
Shall return to claim thee as his bride!"

But it was all fulfilled now: the wanderer had returned to claim his bride—and Oh! how different was the polished, the elegant-mannered, and the intellectual Eugene Viscount Derwent from the comparatively uncouth rustic Reuben Wallis!

And when they were alone together, how May blushed and at first hung down her head in confusion, until reassured by Eugene's words of gushing tenderness,—when he produced the faded white rose, and lovingly announced that in many a bitter moment at first it had consoled him—and in many a wavering moment afterwards it had encouraged him—and in the last few hopeful weeks it had seemed dearer in his eyes than ever!

And on the following morning,—when according to promise Eugene called at the solicitor's house to conduct May and her sire to his own father's mansion, where they were to pass the day,—the moustache and the beard no longer concealed the lower portion of the Viscount's face; and though that countenance had within the last few years sin[...] improved by losing its rustic [...]ness as well as its ruddy and browned hues,—though it had g[...] paler and more oval,—yet bot[...] farmer and his daughter dec[...] that were it not for the mous[...] and beard which had now [...] they would have assuredly reco[...] the face of him whom for so

years they had known as Reuben Wallis.

CHAPTER XLV.

CONCLUSION.

A MONTH had passed since the occurrences just related; and the day dawned on which May Middleton attained her twenty-first year. No special pledge had she as yet given from her lips—nor had the young Viscount exacted any; for *she* remembered and *he* well knew that in this respect she was not her own mistress until the day which now arrived. It was the day on which she was to open the sealed packet entrusted to her by her late uncle, but the existence of which she had not even mentioned to a single soul, not even to her own father: for in this wise had run the injunction solemnly given to her by old George Middleton at the time. Nevertheless with regard to what might be the contents of the packet, she had not the slightest misgiving: she felt assured that it would contain naught militating against her happiness;—on the contrary, her own presentiments, and certain hints slyly dropped by the lawyer (though without allusion to the packet itself) gave her to understand that her deceased relative's views and hopes would be completely carried out by her alliance with him who was formerly Reuben Wallis, but now Viscount Derwent.

In the morning of the day on which our heroine attained her majority, she received the congratulations of her father and of Mr. and Mrs. Johnson; and after breakfast she retired to her chamber, where she drew forth from her desk the sealed packet which she had kept so inviolable according to the injunctions of the late George Middleton. With a feeling of reverential gratitude towards her old uncle who had conferred so many bounties upon herself—and with some degree of suspense, which was however totally apart from evil misgiving—she broke the seal, and from the envelope drew forth a letter addressed to herself. It was written in the firm but peculiar hand of her departed uncle; and its contents ran as follow:—

"Confident, my dearest niece, that you will have fulfilled the promise exacted from you at the time this packet was placed in your hands, I address you on the attainment of your twenty-first birthday as if I myself were personally speaking to you on the occasion. All that human prescience could achieve has been accomplished by me to bring about events which, I hope and trust, are *now* to receive their consummation. From the very first—even before I knew the full extent of his iniquity—did I perceive that your cousin Wilfrid was not the being calculated to ensure your happiness. On the other hand, I saw that you were the object of a pure and honest and unselfish affection on the part of one who, under a somewhat unpolished manner, possessed a thousand good qualities. I felt convinced that Wilfrid would never conduct you to the altar; and I entertained the hope that I might give such an impulse to the progress of events as to shape them in a manner that would gradually but inevitably lead them to a particular issue—I mean your alliance with Reuben Wallis.

"I have studied your disposition well, my dearest niece—I have comprehended it deeply. I have seen how the pride of its spirit would rebel against coercion, and how its natural gentleness would yield to the benign influences which an uncle's love and forethought could bring to bear upon it. Having from almost the very first destined you as my heiress, and having been well assured that you possessed all that innate sense of good-breeding and refinement—all that aptitude for a lady-like polish, without the miserable affectations of the fashionable sphere, which would

fit you for the position you are called upon to fill—it was but just, prudent, and proper that I should adopt such a process as was necessary to render him who loves you in every way worthy of your hand. I have travelled much—I have seen much of the world—I have studied a variety of human races; and my experience leads me to declare my impression that though of rustic rearing from his infancy, gentle blood flows in the veins of Reuben Wallis. In the mystery which hangs round his birth there is much to justify the suspicion, and nothing to disprove it. That mystery may never be cleared up: but if it be, I have every confidence that my idea must receive its fulfilment;—whereas if it be not, the natural generosity of your own heart will lead you to regard him according to the measure of his moral worth alone, without reference to any other ciscumstances.

"And now, my dear May, for a revelation—which perhaps, however, you may have suspected long ere your eye peruses these lines. I have said it was my object to give a certain impulse to events, and to bring particular influences to bear upon you. In carrying out these purposes—particularly the latter—I had recourse to a little device which I am sure you will look upon as venial enough when you consider that my only motive throughout has been the assurance of your welfare as I know it can be best established. I allude to the scene with the gipsies. That little drama was of my getting up: I prearranged it all—and I composed those prophecies, to a portion whereof (that which regarded your wealth) I knew that I myself could give the amplest fulfilment, and to another portion (that which regarded the rival claimants to your love) I felt assured the issue of events would equally prove a justification. The loftiest minds and the grandest intellects are not altogether unsusceptible of superstitious influences, or of those influences which may seem at the time to be mysterious or preternatural; and the individual who hears a prophecy of deep personal interest—who harbours it in the memory, who finds a part fulfilled, and waits in wondering amaze for the development of the rest—by these mere facts helps on events, and more or less unconsciously gives a tone to the very feelings that may lead to the issue which has been predicted. I knew from the very first that it would be thus with you, my dearest niece;—was I right? or was I wrong?

"But in whatsoever manner all this may be, May, heaven bless you! If, contrary to all that I have laboured to bring about, your feelings have flowed in some other channel, I beseech you to follow their dictates; for I know that your choice must be a wise one—and not for an instant will I insult you, May, by expressing the hope that under *no* circumstances is Wilfrid the object of such choice. Therefore, my dearest niece, this address is not to be regarded in any sense an injunction—it is nothing but an explanation of motives, reasons, and proceedings upon my part. You this day attain your twenty first year—you are free in every respect—and again I say, may heaven bless you!

"Your loving and affectionate uncle,

"GEORGE MIDDLETON."

May found herself weeping softly, with mingled feelings of sadness and delicious tenderness, as on terminating the perusal of this letter she pressed it to her lips. She was [...] to think that the kind old man [...] had studied so laboriously to [...] mote her welfare, was not alive [...] contemplate the fulfilment of a[...] that his most sanguine wishes could ever have comprised; and she rejoiced with a serene, holy, and beatific joy to think that everything was taking place in fullest conformity with the deceased old man's hopes.

She showed the letter to her father, as well as to her kind friends the Johnsons: but it was not until after she became Viscountess Derwent that she displayed the document to the eyes of him who figured therein under his humble name of other times.

And a bright, a beautiful, and a happy day it was on which our charming heroine was led to the altar, about a month after the attainment of her majority. Proud and happy were the two fathers—the Earl of Normanton and Mr. Middleton—as they contemplated the tender pair kneeling side by side to receive the nuptual benediction. The worthy lawyer was rejoiced in having been instrumental in carrying out the views of his deceased client—Mrs. Johnson was happy also—General Ruthven felt himself quite young again as he gazed upon the scene—and Josephine, who acted as one of the bridesmaids, experienced the same sisterly regard towards Eugene as towards May.

The lives of our hero and heroine were long and happy; and they were blessed by a progeny who inherited all their virtues as well as their great wealth. The Earl of Normanton, rendered as happy as he possibly could be with the fatal past in his recollection, becamelan altered man, and abandoned for ever those dissipations into which grief had alone impelled him. Mr. Middleton, completely restored to health by the skll of the London physician, lived to a good old age—as did the Earl of Normanton likewise; and they both [illegible] their grandchildren growing [illegible]m.

[illegible] of Agnes nothing was [illegible] and therefore, whether [illegible]ate being committed [illegible]erished naturally but [illegible] some obscure retreat, [illegible]f vaguest and wildest [illegible]hen, full of years, the [illegible]nton surrendered up his breath, a small velvet bag suspended to a black ribon, was found beneath his clothing next to his heart: it contained the auburn tress—and it was buried with him.

For a long time nothing was heard of either Wilfrid Middleton or his wife Roslaind after his issue from Newgate. At length it accidentally came to the knowledge of his relatives in England that Wilfrid had gone to Italy with Rosalind, where, profiting by the iniquitous teachings of Cranston and O'Halloran, he for a while succeeded in winning considerable sums from unwary young men whom his own hypocritical suavity of manner and his wife's splendid charms decoyed into the meshes thus set to ensnare them. But Wilfrid's malpractices were ultimately detected by an Italian officer at Naples: a duel ensued—and Wilfrid was slain. Rosalind fled: she returned to England—and having passed through various gradations of infamy in the British metropolis, she perished miserably at length in a parish workhouse. As for Cranston and O'Halloran they committed some heinous crime in the penal colony to which they were transported, and they died upon the gallows.

In agreeable contrast with the statement summed up in the preceding paragraph, is the record which we have to make in respect to Josephine Ruthven. This amiable young lady was wooed and won by the heir of a ducal house: her existence was a happy one—and the friendship which existed between herself and May lasted until the end, being severed only by the hand of death itself.

Reader, our task is done. To us it has been a pleasing one, inasmuch as we have all along felt that we were tracing a narrative wherein we sought to the best of our humble ability, to work out good and useful morals: for to this end, and not merely with the view of weaving a fiction to interest the mind, have we penned the History of a Fortune.

—: THE END :—

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